

**DOES DISTANCE MAKE THE HEART GROW FONDER?**  
**A CASE STUDY OF ONLINE BACHELOR'S DEGREE GRADUATES AND**  
**THEIR WILLINGNESS TO DONATE TO THEIR ALMA MATER**

A Dissertation

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative case study examined graduates of an online bachelor's degree program from a large, non-profit, state funded, four-year University in the Southwestern United States and gauged their willingness to donate to their alma mater. Currently, online education represents one of the fastest growing segments within higher education in the United States. While this method of educational delivery is increasing access and bolstering enrollments, little is known about the long-term effects this type of educational offering will have on colleges and universities.

It is well documented that one of the strongest motivations, among alumni who donate to their respective college or university, resides in their involvement and level of engagement with their college or university during their time as a student. However, online degree programs, specifically online bachelor's degree programs, offer little, if any, incentive or opportunity for students to become involved with the institution. Given this predicament, this study attempted to ascertain if online education might be helping colleges and universities in the short-term, at the expense of damaging potentially meaningful and profitable relationships with these alumni in the long run.

The intent of this study was to examine a particular set of graduates from the same online bachelor's degree program and assess, through personal interviews, their willingness to donate to their alma mater. The participant responses were analyzed utilizing the theoretical framework of Social Identity Theory. Three themes arose from this study: (1) appreciation, obligation and university reputation influence a willingness to donate, (2) lack of unique experiences impacts association and donations, and (3)

negative perceptions of for-profit universities impact their association with their alma mater. While most of the participants responded that they were willing to donate to their alma mater and did associate themselves with the institution from which they received their online bachelor's degree, their association lacked the strength necessary to develop into actual donations. Therefore, the participant's association with their alma mater appeared strong, but not strong enough for them to engage in the acts, such as donating, that those with a more robust association to their alma mater possess.

## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated first and foremost to my daughters, Avery and Sydney, and any additional children my wife and I may be blessed with in the future. Secondly, it is dedicated to students, like me, who push themselves to do more than they ever thought possible.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

These pages are the written evidence of a long journey. They represent the culmination of years of dedicated time and effort in the field of higher education fundraising. Much of what I have learned and experienced are embedded within its pages and I consider it a privilege to have worked on an issue that is so important to the future of higher education. My hope is that this information will contribute to the existing body of knowledge and help guide administrators and fundraisers at colleges and universities across the country to make informed decisions.

As I penned the final paragraphs of this dissertation I realized that this journey was neither started, nor completed, alone. Many people have invested in me over the years and it is through their contributions that I was able to pursue, and complete, a doctoral degree. Given the encouragement and support of so many, I felt it was necessary to acknowledge those that have had a tremendous impact on me, as well as the roles they played in helping me get to this point.

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To my mother and father, who instilled in me the character needed to pursue a noble endeavor such as this. They dedicated themselves to ensuring I had everything

necessary to achieve in academics, in employment and in life. Their hopes and aspirations, their constant reassurance, and their love molded and motivated me to become the man I am today. When I thought I couldn't, they knew I could. They never stopped believing in that of which their son was capable. For their contributions of love and encouragement, neither syllable nor sentence provides me adequate means for expressing my gratitude.

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Several years ago I was inspired by the words of British explorer George Mallory. When he was asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest he responded, “because it is there.” I was struck by the fact that Mallory pushed himself to achieve a goal while not knowing what the outcome would be. When I embarked on this doctoral degree there was no promise of additional riches or rewards. I truly wanted to push

myself and see what I could accomplish. So for me, the pursuit of this doctoral degree was my Mount Everest. I hope and pray there are others, as I am not tired of climbing.



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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

*“Change is the law of life. Those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.” John F. Kennedy*

A survey of the American higher education landscape reveals an enterprise immersed in turbulence and transformation. Higher education is no stranger to tumultuous times as it has routinely ebbed and flowed with societal trends of the past. However, the current pressure it faces from its many constituencies are pushing and pulling it into uncertain and uncharted territory. Longstanding controversial issues such as the rising cost of tuition and access are competing with new contentious issues such as technology integration and emerging markets. While new issues and endeavors present new opportunities, the implication of these unique matters are not fully understood. Moreover, these new complex challenges and dilemmas have the potential to tremendously impact higher education in equally positive and negative fashions.

Online education is quickly becoming the preferred alternative to the traditional classroom setting (Bejerano, 2008). Because of this colleges and universities are responding with the introduction and expansion of online course offerings, as well as the development of entire online degree programs, primarily due to the mounting pressure they are faced with regarding the cost and access of traditional course offerings. Decisions involving campus-wide technology and internet-based infrastructure upgrades are accompanied by considerable expense, as costs associated with the integration of

computer and internet-mediated teaching tools are high. Regardless of the costs, the number of colleges and universities choosing to embark on these upgrades are increasing, and as a result their classrooms quickly morph into a more expensive and technologically involved space.

Simultaneously, funding from state and federal sources has experienced significant and steady declines for decades. These declines in funding have given colleges and universities little option but to increase tuition and fees which have exceeded inflation for decades (Ehrenberg, 2012) and continue to be a source of concern for students, parents and taxpayers. Underscoring this point, researcher Ronald Ehrenberg noted that during the past three decades undergraduate tuition levels at public four-year colleges and universities increased each year on average by 5.1% more than the rate of inflation (Ehrenberg, 2012).

Tuition being a capped stream of income, colleges and universities have responded by urgently seeking alternative sources of funds in an attempt to sustain their mission and objectives, as well as their prominence and prestige. In some instances the growth witnessed in online educational offerings, more specifically online degree programs, have addressed the aforementioned concerns by expanding access, increasing enrollment and bolstering tuition revenue. However, little is understood about the long-term effects this trend will have on the level of institutional support and contributions from alumni. Though online education in the United States is the fastest growing segment within higher education (Hsu, 2008), there appears to be few, if any,

discussions, strategies or initiatives underway to tap into the alumni that stem from this emerging market within the higher education sector.

While online degree programs are increasing accessibility and growing enrollments, little is known about the long-term effects this type of educational offering will have on the alumni of these online programs and the impact it has on their financial support to the institution. It is well documented that one of the strongest motivations, among alumni who donate to their respective college or university, resides in the involvement and level of engagement they had with their college or university during their time as a student (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). However, online degree programs, more especially online bachelor's degree programs, offer little, if any, opportunity or incentive for students to become involved with the institution. Students of these online degree programs are afforded few opportunities to engage with other students, faculty and staff or participate in campus sponsored student activities. A disturbing finding from a study examining alumni affiliations with their university found that nontraditional alumni, who attended classes online, or off campus, did not have the same affinity for their alma mater as those who attended in a traditional classroom setting (Littrell, 1989). Since previous research has revealed a link between student engagement and financial contributions to the university (Weerts & Ronca, 2007), it leads one to consider the question, could online bachelor's degree programs potentially damage the opportunity for meaningful and profitable relationships with alumni in the long run?



## **Background to the Study**

Higher education in the United States has been in a constant state of flux since its inception. In its beginning, higher education was a religious enterprise. Even while a variety of triggers initiated its establishment, the major impetus was advancing the ideas and doctrine of the church. Churches recognized the benefit education offered in furthering its prominence and growing its members. As M. J. Worth noted, “early colleges were often connected with a sponsoring church, and their fundraising reflected a religious zeal, with gifts being solicited for the purpose of advancing Christianity in a young and ‘uncivilized’ nation” (Worth, 2002, p. 27). With biblical scripture re-enforcing its position, churches were able, with great success, to deem giving a Christian’s obligation. Churches routinely promulgated the notion that the rich owed their wealth to God and consequently had a duty to contribute (Curti & Nash, 1965).

Harvard’s founding in 1636 was made possible by a bequest from John Harvard and represents one of the earliest, and most well-known, philanthropic contributions to American higher education (Curti & Nash, 1965). By the early 1800s, a new focus on support for higher education was emerging. In an open letter written in 1802 by the first president of Bowdoin College, to faculty, students and alumni, Joseph McKeen introduced ideas that many believe ignited a paradigm shift in fundraising for higher education.

It always ought be remembered that literary institutions are founded and endowed for the common good and not for the private advantage of those who resort to them for education...[Every] man who has been aided by a

public institution to acquire an education and to qualify himself for usefulness, is under peculiar obligations to exert his talents for the public good (Thelin, 2004, p. 71).

These remarks represented a new approach in fundraising for American public colleges and universities. Moreover, they were among the earliest attempts to persuade former students and graduates of their duty to give back to the institutions from which they received their education. From this point forward, public institutions of higher learning would increase their emphasis on support from alumni and pursue new and novel methods of obtaining it, which ushered in the creation of formal alumni associations at colleges and universities across the country. While alumni loyalty and spirit existed in America since the first graduation of students from Harvard, there were no coordinated efforts to start groups of this type and little benefit was seen in their existence. However, as alumni associations grew in number and size, so to, did the annual giving and endowments they would eventually generate.

By the late 1800s and early 1900s the church's hold on higher education had loosened considerably. This is especially true concerning public institutions of higher learning where religious organizations had little, if any, connection at all. The sources of philanthropic giving to higher education had changed as well. Philanthropy during this time period, dominated by businesses and corporations seeking individuals and research to further its own agenda, commanded a much greater influence on institutions of higher learning and the curriculum they offered (Curti & Nash, 1965). With the force of big money behind them, scientific, technological, and commercial instruction carved

substantial niches in the standard course of study. The efforts of numerous philanthropists, combined in some cases with the ideas of others, worked creatively to produce a profound change in American higher education with broad economic, technological, and social repercussions (Curti & Nash, 1965).

As higher education in America matured it became necessary to establish formal measures of handling and processing the increasing number of charitable contributions institutions were garnering. The organized roots of today's development offices, found on the vast majority of both public and private college and university campuses, began in the early 1900s and owe their existence to Charles Sumner Ward, a noted fund raiser and executive for the YMCA of Chicago. He shaped the art of development by creating a set of standards, methods, and techniques that most development offices would eventually employ. However, further refinement was necessary as the process of development eventually grew into a profession. "A distinction was drawn between 'development' as a process and 'fund raising' as the narrower task of soliciting gifts. It was Ward who made this distinction a reality, with his emphasis on system and strategy, in contrast to the 'beggar' fund raisers of earlier decades" (Worth, 2002, p. 27).

During Ward's time, most colleges and universities could not afford a full time staff dedicated to development. Consequently, those colleges and universities that could afford it, and were progressive enough to see its potential, hired consulting firms to do the job (Worth, 2002). "As development programs became more sophisticated, more intense, and more continuous, institutions came to recognize the value of having such a fund-raising professional as a full-time member of the college or university staff"

(Worth, 2002, p. 27). Not surprisingly, development as a profession has grown in size and scope to the point that the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) currently boasts a sizeable membership. CASE recently stated that its online member directory “includes more than 60,000 advancement professionals from more than 3,400 educational institutions...worldwide” (www.case.org, 2005).

It has become evident, based on the number of fundraising professionals currently employed and increases seen in giving to higher education, that what once began as a supportive role has slowly morphed into a more critical component of college and university budgets, both public and private. Currently, state appropriations for higher education are at their lowest levels across the country (Ehrenberg, 2012). While colleges and universities often respond with tuition and fee hikes, many are mindful that there is a limit to what the market will bear for the educational offerings and services they provide. In his study focusing on the transition currently taking place in American higher education, Ehrenberg wrote “tuition increases in recent decades have barely offset a long-run decline in state appropriations” (Ehrenberg, 2012, p.195). Thus, it seems essential that institutions of higher education exhaust all efforts to maximize alternative sources of revenue and funding.

Fundraising from charitable and philanthropic individuals and organizations has been one of the most popular avenues in higher education for additional funding. Penelepe Hunt, a prominent fundraising consultant, recently emphasized this point in a recent lecture regarding higher education fundraising stating, “private philanthropy is the only avenue of unlimited growth potential for higher education” (Hunt, 2015).

Therefore, with the ever expanding landscape online classes and degrees are creating in higher education, coupled with alumni who lack the connectivity of traditional students, it is imperative those in higher education find a way to reach these alumni so true, unlimited growth can continue.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research involving online degrees, and online education in general, focus on a wide array of topics. The most involved areas of study include new and evolving pedagogy, educational quality and outcomes, community building among online students, cost comparisons versus traditional degrees, and corporate perceptions. However, there exists a noticeable absence of research focusing on graduates of online bachelor's degree programs and their willingness to make charitable contributions to their alma mater. This absence, therefore, makes it difficult to develop accurate assumptions about online alumni, or alumni who took a large portion of their classes online, and their willingness to offer financial support to their respective universities, as well as their motivations behind such philanthropic inclinations. Four aspects related to this problem are clear: (1) online education is the fastest growing segment within higher education in the U.S. (Hsu, 2008); (2) roughly two-thirds of the nation's colleges and universities are offering online courses and online degree programs (Weiss, 2011); (3) higher education in most states have experienced steady declines in state funding (Bhatt, Rork & Walker, 2011); and (4) alumni typically represent the best pool of potential donors to colleges and universities in the U.S. (Black, Dawson & Ferdig, 2006).

Given the steady decline in state funding for higher education nationwide, and the enormous growth in online education at institutions of higher learning across the country, it would appear prudent that colleges and universities develop tactics to capture the hearts and minds of their online bachelor's degree alumni and employ strategies that create a culture of giving. With this in mind, several questions will serve as the guiding principles for this research.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) To what extent are graduates of public, non-profit online bachelor's degree programs willing to donate money to their college or university?
- 2) How do their virtual classroom or instructional experiences as students enrolled in online bachelor's degrees impact their willingness to donate money to their college or university?
- 3) Additionally, how do their non-instructional experiences inside and outside the virtual classroom impact their willingness to donate money to their college or university?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine graduates of an online bachelor's degree program and gauge their willingness to donate money to their alma mater. Using a variety of qualitative methods, I will attempt to ascertain what effects and ramifications the graduate's responses have with respect to their alma mater. Furthermore, I hope to gather assumptions that will contribute to the broader knowledge of online bachelor's

degree graduates and their willingness to donate money back to their alma mater. While much is written about the motivations of donors, data concerning online bachelor's degree alumni and their motivations to give to their alma mater is lacking. Ultimately, my purpose is to aid in the understanding of online alumni and shed light on how their unique experience impacts their willingness to donate back to their alma mater. Within this study, I will identify the research design and will discuss the reasoning behind its selection. In addition, information in the following chapters will include a thorough description of data sources, data collection, and data analysis.

Research that delves into the motivations behind alumni giving has identified several potential possibilities. Drawing on previous research, Wastyn focused on four categorical factors that appear to make alumni more likely to contribute to their alma mater: (1) demographics, (2) experiences, (3) motives, and (4) trigger events (Wastyn, 2009). In her discussion of these factors, Wastyn notes that the demographical component of income appears to be the greatest determining factor (Wastyn, 2009). While many researchers have arrived at similar conclusions, Weerts and Ronca (2007) researched the motivations of alumni donations through the lens of alumni connectedness to their alma mater. In their article examining supportive alumni, the authors conclude that a strong connection appears to exist between the act of giving and how alumni view their alma mater, level of satisfaction with the experience they have had as alumni, and their degree of engagement in alumni activities (Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

Focusing more on the student experience, additional research delving into the motivations of alumni giving have explored experiences and activities that occurred while enrolled as a student. Analyzing data from the College and Beyond survey, Clotfelter found evidence that student experiences, more specifically participation in extra-curricular activities, tended to increase the likelihood of future donations when compared to other possible motivations (Clotfelter, 2001). When researching alumni from a university school of business, Tom and Elmer argued that connections between alumni and their alma mater, which might lead to future giving, occur and develop in the classroom rather than in co-curricular activities (Tom & Elmer, 1994).

Yet another student experience that leads to greater connectedness, and which appears to positively impact future giving by alumni, resides in successful university athletic programs. After compiling donation records from the alumni of a selective research university, and comparing it to the university's overall athletic performance, Meer and Rosen (2008) found evidence that athletic success, in general, appears to have a positive impact on future alumni giving. The authors noted, "to the extent that universities care about turning their undergraduates into future donors, it would seem that university's should nurture broad varsity athletic programs" (Meer & Rosen, 2008, p.294).

This researcher seeks to analyze the relationship that exists between alumni and their alma mater, specifically through the perceptions of those who graduated with a bachelor's degree offered entirely, or largely, online from a public, non-profit university. By exploring this unique relationship, it is my hope that valuable insights can be



obtained regarding what impact these relationships have on future fundraising from graduates of online bachelor's degree programs. Through the information gained, the researcher is optimistic that strategies can be developed that might aid in the creation of a culture of giving among online bachelor's degree alumni.

### **Glossary of Key Terms**

As both online education and higher education fundraising have expanded and evolved in the U.S., various terms and definitions have been used with very little consistency. Therefore, a list of pertinent terms that are utilized in this study, along with their definitions, is provided so readers will have a better understanding of fundraising related terms, as well as academic and research related terms.

#### **Higher Education Fundraising Terminology. (in alphabetic order)**

Advancement: “a broader term that encompasses all of the functions related to advancing the cause of a program or university externally” (Hunt, 2012, p.6).

Alma Mater: a college or university from which an individual has graduated, most commonly the one from which they earned their undergraduate degree (Dictionary.com, 2015).

Annual Gifts: refer to donations that are smaller in size and renewable, at least on an annual basis, and are usually grouped together to accomplish a programmatic purpose or goal (Hunt, 2012). The combination of all annual gifts are referred to as the university's annual fund (Hunt, 2012).

Development: “refers to fundraising and all the steps involved in the process of raising money” (Hunt, 2012, p. 6).

Friend: a development oriented term given to those individuals who are closely associated with a college or university, maintains a passion for one or more of its academic/athletic programs or initiatives, makes donations of their time, talent and/or resources; yet has not received a degree from said college or university.

Major Gifts: refers to larger donor contributions that are targeted towards a more transformational university initiative or goal. These gifts range from \$1,000 to \$100,000 depending on the university and the size and maturity of its development operations (Hunt, 2012).

Philanthropy: “a voluntary exchange in which the values and aspirations of donors are matched with the values and aspirations of those they benefit”  
(www.case.org, 2012).

#### **Academic and Research Terminology. (in alphabetic order)**

Alumni: the term applied to individuals who graduate with an undergraduate or graduate degree from a college or university.

Case Study: “a method of qualitative research that is bounded and limited to a single unit of study that is “particularistic, descriptive and heuristic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29).

Member Checks: a qualitative research technique where the researcher shares data interpretations with each participant to ensure the researcher has fully understood the participant's perspective (Creswell, 1998).

Online Bachelor's Degree: a bachelor's degree which is offered, and earned, entirely, or primarily, through classes that are administered via the internet utilizing a web-based interface rather than through a traditional classroom or campus setting.

Purposive Sampling: a data sourcing strategy that selects participants to a study based on the relevance of their experiences that are central to the purpose of the research (Patton, 1990).

Semi-Structured Interviews: an interviewing style that allows the interviewer to ability to reword questions, or ask in differing order, in an attempt to respond to the natural progression of the conversation and uncover as much data as possible (Merriam, 1998).

Social Identity Theory: a framework for understanding individual and group dynamics that shows how people develop perceived membership and a sense of belonging within specific groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Traditional Student: for the purposes of this study this term will be utilized to describe the undergraduate student who enrolls in courses in the more conventional sense described as a classroom on campus with face-to-face interaction(s) with a professor.

### **Significance of Study**

Examining online bachelor's degree students and their willingness to donate money to their alma mater is critical given the growth online degree programs are experiencing. As online bachelor's degree programs increase in number, more students from these programs will be graduating. As Black et al noted, "The majority of research within the field of alumni development focuses on traditional undergraduate student populations at private and public universities ignoring the growing body of non-traditional students who are increasingly filling classroom rosters" (Black, Dawson & Ferdig, 2006, p.43).

This is important, especially when one considers Allen and Seaman's assessment that, "The growth of online education only points upward as approximately 2.6 million students were expected to study online in 2004" (Allen & Seaman, 2004, p.1). Noting the continued growth, Weiss cited a recent Sloan Consortium report that stated, "More than 5.5 million students, roughly 30% of the nation's postsecondary population, are taking at least one online course, and two-thirds of America's colleges and universities offer such courses in response to rapidly escalating demand" (Weiss, 2011, p.1). The growth in online education is not limited to online courses alone, as Morrison also noted that the market for fully online degree programs has grown at a rate of 40% annually (Morrison, 2003). Moving forward, it is critical that these students are studied in an effort to obtain their perspectives about their experience, their feelings and their willingness to donate. The following discussion of this topic reveals the extent to which

researchers, and higher education fundraisers, do not know or understand concerning these unique alumni.

First, how will their experience as an online student impact their status as an alumnus? Secondly, will they contribute their time, talent and resources to their alma mater? Additional evidence of significance rests in the vast amount of information that can be gleaned from such an understudied population. The implications that lie at the root of their responses could have a profound impact on the development of current and future online bachelor's degree programs. I do not propose that this dissertation will identify every facet of the unique dynamic that exists between online bachelor's degree graduates and their willingness to donate back to their alma mater. However, my aim is to gain useful insight and answers to the questions I have posed.

Charitable donations to institutions of higher education are given for a variety of reasons. As previously mentioned in her study regarding the motivations of non-donors to institutions of higher education, Wastyn (2009) relies on previous research and cites four factors that motivate alumni to donate to their alma mater: demographics, experiences, motives and trigger events. Given the large amount of demographic information available, age and income appear to be the factors that have the most direct and positive influence on giving (Wastyn, 2009). Second to age and income are experiences, which relate to the individual's involvement in organizations or extra-curricular activities (Wastyn, 2009). The motives of the donor correlate to positive feelings of joy and satisfaction.

Many of these donations go towards a host of noble causes, such as the enrichment, education, and enlightenment of students. In turn, philanthropic funds given to colleges and universities act as investments in our future and serve the overall benefit of society. While large donations serve lofty and altruistic purposes, smaller, more frequent, donations represent the lion's share of most donations received and shoulder much of the fundraising burden in higher education which serves to supplement operating expenses, equipment, and salary supplements. Regardless of their size upon arrival or how they are used, Holmes explains, "Charitable donations are a significant source of revenue for many non-profit organizations, including institutes of higher education" (Holmes, 2009, p.18). This study is, therefore, significant because it attempts to fill the gap that exists within the research and literature concerning online bachelor's degree graduates, based on the inadequate information available, and the potential implications of this growing population of alumni.

### **Conclusion**

Given the serious financial constraints most public colleges and universities are facing, it is necessary to explore new fundraising strategies and seek new potential donors to offset declining state appropriations. As Mann points out, "it is clear that an institution's ability to realize their innovative but costly strategic goals is directly dependent on their ability to generate donations from alumni, foundations, friends, parents, and other institutional partners" (Mann, 2007, p. 35). Uncovering the perceptions of online degree graduates could reveal a myriad of possibilities and opportunities for non-profit colleges and universities. The hope is that the theories, and

opportunities for future research that stem from this study, will add to the body of knowledge that has been slow to emerge in the area of online degree graduates.

The next chapter will serve as a review of literature and will address: (1) the growth of online education and online bachelor's degree programs in higher education; (2) research involving online bachelor's degree graduates; (3) declines in state funding for higher education; and (4) alumni as revenue sources. Chapter two will include the theoretical framework being used to guide this dissertation, along with a description of the framework and how it applies to this study. Chapter three will cover the research methods utilized in this dissertation and chapter four will provide the data analysis and study results. Chapter five will focus on the summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

As serious financial issues loom on the horizon for many institutions of higher learning it would appear imperative that colleges and universities embrace new ideas and strategies to address them. The first step in crafting any solution is having a firm understanding of the problem, as well as the unique dynamics with which it is surrounded. The present dilemma, as it relates to this study, is a lack of steady funding from historically reliable sources, such as state appropriations and student tuition and fees. Maximizing charitable contributions from alumni, and tapping into the growing population of online bachelor's degree graduates, could ease the financial constraints that many colleges and universities are facing.

Within this chapter I will highlight and discuss literature and research that is most closely related to online bachelor's degree alumni and higher education fundraising. It is important to note that during an extensive search for studies and literature concerning online bachelor's degree graduates, and their willingness to donate to their alma mater, little information was uncovered. The lack of research on this topic is disconcerting given that online education represents the fastest growing segment of higher education in the United States (Hsu, 2008). Most large-scale research studies focus on the philanthropic inclinations of donors and alumni, and while there is substantial literature detailing donors and their philanthropic motivations, most fail to explore how those motivations are linked to the donor's alma mater and how those linkages are impacted by an alumnus who earned their bachelor's degree online. It



would seem prudent that additional research should be conducted to explore this trend and attempt to uncover the implications it has on institutions of higher education.

As the intent of this study is to examine online bachelor's degree graduates and gauge their willingness to donate money to their alma mater, this review of literature will specifically cover topics such as online education within higher education, research involving online degree graduates, declines in state funding for higher education, and alumni as sources of revenue. My aim in exploring these particular topics is to build a stable foundation of pertinent research and information for this study. Each of these areas have their own specific influences on the research questions of this study and in order to accurately analyze participant responses a firm understanding of each topic must be established.

I chose social identity theory as the theoretical framework for this dissertation. Since its development in 1979, social identity theory has been utilized in numerous studies, as it provides a well-established context for understanding individual and group dynamics. Later in this chapter I will outline the reasons for its selection and explain in greater detail why it is the ideal theoretical framework for this particular dissertation. While a direct link to online bachelor's degree graduates and their willingness to donate to their alma mater is not represented in the higher education literature, indirect and secondary linkages towards the foundation of this study's premise do exist. What follows is a brief description of each of these bodies of work.

## **Online Higher Education**

Online education is one of the fastest growing segments among institutions of higher education in the U.S. (Hsu, 2008). As Hsu points out, “Enrollment in internet courses is rising much faster than overall enrollment in higher education” (Hsu, 2008, p.4). What’s more, the growth in online education hasn’t been limited to courses alone, but also to entire online degree programs. According to a recent study, from 2000 to 2005 the number of online degree programs offered both within the U.S. and globally has expanded remarkably (Mariasingam & Hanna, 2006). Online education’s popularity stems from the many advantages it offers students. While convenience is often heralded as the most popular benefit, online education also enables expanded educational offerings and increased institutional choice. Consequently, the enormous growth seen in online education is having a noticeable effect on college and university campuses nationwide.

Online education has grown exponentially since its introduction into higher education in the late 1990s. As Hsu aptly describes, “Online learning is higher education’s growth track” (Hsu, 2008, p. 4). The steady evolution of computing and technology has ushered in a wave of new learning models and options. As a result, “Approximately 72% of colleges and universities offer distance education courses” (Morrison, 2003, p.8), and 53.6% of schools participating in the Sloan Consortium’s 2004 survey agree that online education is critical to their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2004). While the growth rate is impressive, what is equally encouraging is the growing percentage of colleges and universities that view online education as critical to

their long-term strategy. This is important, especially when one considers Allen and Seaman's assessment that, "The growth of online education only points upward as approximately 2.6 million students were expected to study online in 2004" (Allen & Seaman, 2004, p.1).

Detailing this point, Weiss cited a recent Sloan Consortium report that stated, "More than 5.5 million students, roughly 30% of the nation's postsecondary population, are taking at least one online course, and two-thirds of America's colleges and universities offer such courses in response to rapidly escalating demand" (Weiss, 2011, p.1). In a more recent survey by members of the Babson Survey Research Group, authors Allen and Seaman show evidence that over a ten year period of observation, online education is still outpacing traditional higher education delivery methods. The authors note, "for every year of this report series online enrollments have increased at rates far in excess of those of overall higher education" (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p.4).

Michael Baer, a vice president at the American Council on Education, wrote as early as 2002, "technology provides higher education with the potential to disseminate knowledge to more people than ever before" (Levine & Sun, 2002, p.iii). As Levine and Sun note, technological increases in computing power, along with huge investments in Internet broadband services from corporations, is expanding access to higher education for millions of potential new students. Several institutions of higher education, especially those in the for-profit arena, have embraced technology and have expanded educational opportunities to the masses. Because of this, Black et al suggest, "The college student of the future will not look like the college student of today" (Black, Dawson & Ferdig,

2006, p.44). With growing online course offerings and degree programs, from colleges and universities across the country, it is likely that future students will have opportunities to study a broader range of disciplines from a multitude of institutions not previously within reach. The authors also conclude, “The non-traditional student population is thus fast becoming the norm at some colleges and universities nationwide” (Black, Dawson & Ferdig, 2006, p.44).

Courses in online education aren’t the only aspect of the field that is growing. Fully online degree programs are also experiencing large scale growth. In their report on online education Allen and Seaman (2005) found that 31.9% of southern U.S. colleges and universities were offering online bachelor degree programs. In a report on the transition taking place in higher education, Morrison pointed out how Stanford University graduated the first 25 students from its global online engineering program as far back as 2001 (Morrison, 2003). Morrison also noted that the market for fully online degree programs has grown at a rate of 40% annually (Morrison, 2003). Another study citing the growing popularity of online degree programs, including statistics from U.S. News and World Report, that show as of 2006 there were 263 individually accredited online graduate degree programs throughout the U.S. (Chapman, 2006). Perhaps the most robust evidence regarding the growth of online degree programs came from the Sloan Consortium report “Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the U.S.” The authors noted “a far larger proportion of higher education institutions have moved from offering online courses to providing complete online programs” (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p.20). The authors also reported that “the continued growth in online

enrollments has come from the transition of institutions with only a few online courses moving to offer fully online programs” (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p.21).

These figures become even more staggering when compared to the relatively flat growth of traditional classroom enrollment. Miller’s comparison of online and traditional course growth in 2009 revealed, “Overall enrollment in higher education grew less than 2%” (Miller, 2010, p.1). This enormous growth in online education is not unique to traditional four-year institutions. Community colleges are also experiencing increased demand and enrollment in online course offerings. “For the 2008-09 academic year, enrollment in online learning at community colleges grew 22% over the 2007-08 academic year, up from a growth rate of 11% in the previous year” (Miller, 2010, p.1). While the growth of online education at community colleges across the country has slowed, it is still outpacing overall enrollment (Finkel, 2015). From 2013-2014 more than 5.5 million community college students enrolled in online programs, which represents an almost 5 percent increase over the previous year (Finkel, 2015). These increases in online enrollment will likely continue and force traditional four-year institutions to broaden their offerings in order to remain competitive and attract more students.

The influence that non-traditional students have on higher education is growing and existing literature illustrates the point that higher education in America is changing. Chief among those changes is the growing population of online education students. Public colleges and universities were slow to respond to the market potential of students seeking additional educational opportunities. Only after significant growth was seen

among for-profit institutions did their public counterparts start to court this expanding sector (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Now that online education is becoming the norm in higher education, it is time for public institutions to fully embrace this population of students, begin realizing their giving potential, and employ strategies that tap into it.

### **Research Involving Online Degree Graduates**

Limited research has been conducted regarding online bachelor's degree graduates from non-profit institutions and their willingness to donate financial resources to their alma mater. As Black et al noted, "The majority of research within the field of alumni development focuses on traditional undergraduate student populations at private and public universities ignoring the growing body of non-traditional students who are increasingly filling classroom rosters" (Black, Dawson & Ferdig, 2006, p.43). In a time of diminishing state funding, it is odd that colleges and universities appear disinterested in ways of attracting more donations from such a large, and growing, population of alumni.

In 2002, online courses, more specifically degrees offered entirely online, while still in their early stages at most traditional public and private colleges and universities, started to show significant growth in both the number of courses being offered and student enrollment. However Schejbal and Lescht noted that as recently as 2002 no development offices in the U.S. were addressing online education alumni (Schejbal & Lescht, 2002). Development and fund raising offices were either caught off guard with regards to the explosive growth of online education, or simply didn't care. Research by

Black et al (2006) has shown that the little emphasis paid to online education students, as it pertains to their fundraising potential, has had a negative effect on their willingness to give back to their alma mater. “Current research supports the argument that it is less common for non-traditional students to become active, donating alumni” (Black, Dawson & Ferdig, 2006, p.44). As these authors allude, colleges and universities invest few resources in the attempt to reconnect or lure alumni who earned an online degree. The authors conclude, “Alumni development offices have failed to encourage the participation of non-traditional students in development campaigns; or perhaps they have designed alumni programming that does not appeal to this unique and diverse demographic” (Black, Dawson & Ferdig, 2006, p.44).

### **Declines in State Funding for Higher Education**

Throughout the previous ten years of expanded utilization of online education, state funding for higher education has experienced serious decline. Interestingly, the decline in state funding had become a steady occurrence long before the economic collapse of 2008. In their study on higher education appropriations Bhatt et al wrote, “State funding for higher education has fallen approximately 3.4% in fiscal year 2009-10 compared to the previous year...35 states have decreased their appropriation” (Bhatt, Rork & Walker, 2011, p. 353).

Higher education funding in Texas has suffered a similar fate, as noted by a 2006 report from the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts. “From fiscal years 2002 to 2007, the Texas state budget was cut in terms of real dollar, per-student funding for universities by 19.92%; for community colleges the per-student cut was 35.29%”

(TCPA, 2006). The decreased funding for higher education in Texas has resulted in drastic increases in tuition and fees, a practice that is not likely sustainable. “From fiscal years 1999 to 2006, average tuition and fees at public universities have increased 95.5%. Average tuition and fees at community colleges have increased 71.5%” (TCPA, 2006).

During the previous ten years, funding for higher education has experienced a steady decline in states across the country. In a 2003 Distance Education Report, Dennis predicted continuing declines in funding when he wrote, “Federal and state funding for higher education is likely to decrease in the future, leaving colleges and universities with little choice but to rely on other forms of revenue, including alumni donation” (Dennis, 2003, p.2). He proved to be correct in his assumption as several states were forced to make larger than expected cuts to higher education funding due to a slow recovery from the recession of 2001.

In a 2006 report by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, it was noted that, “fully 50 of the 50 states are expected to experience long-term structural deficits in funds for postsecondary education” (Federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006). The trend of diminished state funding has continued well into the first full decade of the twenty-first century. As Bhatt et al wrote, “According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, state funding for higher education has fallen approximately 3.4% in FY 2009-10 compared to the previous year...35 states have decreased their appropriation” (Bhatt et al., 2011).

After the severe economic decline that was experienced in 2007 and 2008, many elected state officials are faced with the difficult task of continuing to provide necessary



funding for hosts of state programs, not just higher education, with diminishing amounts of tax dollars. At the same time tax payers are becoming more vocal in their criticism of state supported higher education, its rising costs and its overall value to the public good. This phenomenon speaks directly to statements Mann made in his article on understanding donor motives, “The reliance on fund-raising dollars is even more pronounced due to the rising public scrutiny of the cost of higher education” (Mann, 2007, p. 35).

### **Alumni as Revenue Sources**

Americans continue to be some of the most generous supporters of higher education. “In 2008, private contributions to educational institutions reached an all-time high, totaling \$31.6 billion” (Masterson, 2009, p.16). The vast majority of those making contributions are alumni, or those categorized as “friends” of the particular institution to which they have given. As Holmes proclaims, “Alumni are the largest source of voluntary support, accounting for nearly 28% of total contributions and financing 7.1% of total institutional expenditures” (Holmes, 2009, p.18). Highlighting the need for alumni as alternative sources of funding, a recent study stated, “unlike for-profit organizations generating their own revenues as the primary function, fundraising is a major money source for non-profit organizations” (Moon & Azizi, 2013, p. 112). Given their level of support, and the increasing reliance colleges and universities have on donated funds, measures should be taken to maximize alumni giving.

The creation of formal, and informal, alumni organizations at American colleges and universities dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976).

Organizations of this type offer alumni a continued affiliation with their alma mater, as well as providing intellectual stimulation, prestige, identity stability, and a mechanism for philanthropic or tax motivated donations (Pickett, 1986). The benefits of alumni organizations, or associations, don't stop with the alumni themselves, yet extend to the college or university as well. Alumni routinely offer numerous types of support beyond financial contributions such as help in student recruitment, job placement and career advice, as well as attendance at institutional events (Ransdell, 1986). Given the mutually beneficial relationship that often exists between alumni and their alma maters it has been suggested that alumni are the financial backbone of institutions of higher education (Bakal, 1979). Ransdell highlighted Bakal's notion by adding "few constituents are more important to an institution than its alumni" (Ransdell, 1986, p. 378).

While the advantages to establishing and maintaining a healthy relationship with alumni seems apparent, as Blakely points out, it is far from universal (Blakely, 1974). Alumni connection and involvement at colleges and universities, both public and private, vary greatly. As Pumerantz noted in her study regarding alumni involvement and financial contributions, the 5-year average of alumni that donate back to their alma mater is 17.4%, while the 10-year average is slightly higher at 18.8% (Pumerantz, 2005). While these numbers might appear low, they actually trend similarly to alumni donation statistics dating back to the mid 1970's. During the 1970's Bakal estimated the percentage of alumni who provided financial support to be around 14% (Bakal, 1974). Writing on the subject of donors towards the latter part of the 1970's, Reichley estimated alumni financial support at less than 25%. In an attempt to explain this low percentage of

alumni financial support, Reichley (1977) pointed to several surveys that suggested “while alumni like their alma maters, most remain apathetic and uninvolved” (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 106). Regardless of the reasons why these percentages are so low, it would appear that alumni financial support towards their alma mater has gone relatively unchanged.

Concerning the revenue they generate, many alumni donations go towards a host of noble causes, such as the enrichment, education, and enlightenment of students. In turn, philanthropic funds given to colleges and universities act as investments in future generations and serve to benefit of society. While large donations serve lofty and altruistic purposes smaller, more frequent, donations represent the lion share of most donations received and shoulder much of the fundraising burden in higher education, which serves to supplement operating expenses, equipment, and salary supplements. Regardless of their size upon arrival or how they are used, Holmes explains, “Charitable donations are a significant source of revenue for many non-profit organizations, including institutes of higher education” (Holmes, 2009, p.18).

Given the serious financial constraints most public colleges and universities are facing, it would make sense to explore new fund raising strategies and seek new potential donors to offset declining state appropriations. As Mann points out, “it is clear that an institution’s ability to realize their innovative but costly strategic goals is directly dependent on their ability to generate donations from alumni, foundations, friends, parents, and other institutional partners” (Mann, 2007, p. 35). Uncovering the perceptions of online bachelor’s degree graduates could reveal a myriad of possibilities

and opportunities for non-profit colleges and universities. The hope is that the theories, and opportunities for future research that stem from this study, will add to the body of knowledge that has been slow to emerge in the area of online bachelor's degree graduates.

### **Alumni Donor Motivations**

Charitable donations to institutions of higher education are given for a variety of reasons. Research that delves into the motivations behind alumni giving has identified several potential possibilities. Drawing on previous research in her meta-analysis of donor motivations, Wastyn identified four categorical factors that appear to make alumni more likely to contribute to their alma mater: (1) demographics, (2) experiences, (3) motives, and (4) trigger events (2009). In her discussion of these factors Wastyn notes that the demographical component of income appears to be the greatest determining factor (2009). While some researchers have arrived at similar conclusions, research by Weerts and Ronca identified other factors that they argued imparted a greater influence on alumni donor motivations (2007). Specifically, they explored the impact student experiences have on the motivations of alumni donations and their research examined donor motivations through the lens of alumni connectedness to their alma mater.

Weerts and Ronca's research wasn't the first to explore student experiences as a motivator donating. Numerous studies point to the growing impact that a positive undergraduate experience has on future alumni giving (Koole, 1981; Tom & Elmer, 1994; Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Gaier, 2003; Monks, 2003; Conner, 2005; Sun, 2005; Tsao & Coll, 2005). In their research on the sources of alumni generosity, Baade and

Sundberg cite research dating back to the mid 90's that pointed to the quality of student educational experiences as a significant influence of alumni giving (1996). In their article examining supportive alumni, the authors conclude that a strong connection appears to exist between the act of giving and how alumni view their alma mater, level of satisfaction with the experience they have had as alumni and their degree of engagement in alumni activities (Baade & Sundberg, 1996; Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

In subsequent studies focusing on younger alumni similar results were found that related specifically to an alumnus' undergraduate experience. In their research on young alumni donors, McDearmon and Shirley noted that positive undergraduate experiences also appeared to have the greatest effect on a younger alumnus' willingness to donate back to their institution (2009). Additional research on alumni experiences has shown time and time again that the level of satisfaction with their undergraduate experience appears to be the most consistent motivator for future alumni donations (Tom & Elmer, 1994; Clotfelter, 2003; Gaier, 2005; Weerts & Ronca, 2007; James III, 2008).

Delving deeper into the various elements of the student experience, additional research examining the motivations of alumni giving have explored experiences and activities that occurred while enrolled as a student. Analyzing data from the College and Beyond survey, Clotfelter found evidence that student experiences, more specifically participation in extra-curricular activities, tended to increase the likelihood of future donations when compared to other possible motivations (Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Clotfelter, 2001; Goldberg, 2004; Sun, 2005; Wastyn, 2009). Additional research on student experiences yielded similar results revealing membership in student

organizations, and even on-campus residential status played a positive role in future alumni giving (Monks, 2003; Marr et al, 2005; Laguilles, 2008). Other factors that positively affect alumni giving include involvement with the university after graduation (Lindahl & Winship, 1992; Taylor & Martin, 1995). The authors noted examples of this type of involvement could include service on university advisory boards, or speaking to classes about industry specific issues.

In their research involving alumni from a university school of business, Tom and Elmer argued that connections between alumni and their alma mater, that could lead to alumni giving, occur and develop in the classroom rather than in co-curricular activities (Tom & Elmer, 1994). Similar types of connections appear to exist in the online community as well. Findings from a study examining the process of community building in online classes indicated that students felt all the necessary elements for building connections with each other, as well as the university, were available (Brown, 2001). These connections can stem from the relationships built with faculty and staff that students interact with, or the influence of other online students who outwardly and routinely express their admiration for the institution.

Yet another student experience that leads to greater connectedness, and which appears to positively impact future giving by alumni, resides in successful university athletic programs (Brooker & Klastoin, 1981). After compiling donation records from the alumni of a selective research university, and comparing it to the university's overall athletic performance, Meer and Rosen (2008) found evidence that athletic success, in general, appears to have a positive impact on future alumni giving. The authors noted,

“to the extent that universities care about turning their undergraduates into future donors, it would seem that universities’ should nurture broad varsity athletic programs” (Meer & Rosen, 2008, p.294). Due to the impact that athletic programs have, and their influence on the university’s culture and traditions, questions regarding attendance and participation at athletic events will be asked of each participant.

For decades research regarding the age of a donor has shown to have a positive influence on giving. In a study focusing on alumni donor traits Wastyn noted that age and income appeared to be the factors that have the most direct and positive influence on giving (Koole, 1981; Grant & Lindauer, 1986; Bristol Jr., 1990; Okunade & Wunnava, 1994; Harrison et al, 1995; Clotfelter, 2001; Quigley et al, 2002; Conner, 2005; Wastyn, 2009). Examining this phenomenon further, research by Bruggink and Siddiqui revealed that for every 1-year increase in a donor’s age increases donations to their alma mater by five percent (1995). Additional research on the life cycle of alumni donations indicated that the percentage of donors in an alumni class is low immediately following graduation, then increases quickly for the first ten to twenty years afterwards, and continues to grow, albeit at a slower rate, twenty to thirty years after graduation (Bristol, 1990).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research for this dissertation was structured utilizing a case study design and relies on the theoretical framework of social identity theory. Social identity theory was developed in 1979 by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner. I found Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory as the most applicable lens with which to view online

bachelor's degree alumni. Social identity theory provides insight into the unique dynamics that exist between an individual and an organization, as well as the impact these connections have with regards to the development of an individual's self-image, and ultimately their behavior. Hence, social identity theory provides the most applicable backdrop with which to study online bachelor's degree graduates and gauge their willingness to donate to their alma mater.

Included in the following discussion is a historical narrative, along with detailed explanations of how this framework will guide my research and how it is connected to the research topic. Social identity theory as a theoretical framework is conceptually relevant to elements of organizational attachment such as organizational involvement, support, and philanthropic giving. Each of the aforementioned characteristics that can be applied to organizations, and their resulting behaviors, can be applied to the relationship that exists between alumni and the college or university from which they graduated. Therefore, this study relies heavily on the attributes and characteristics of the unique theoretical framework of social identity theory.

### **Principles of Social Identity Theory**

Due to the complexity of social identity theory, I have provided a list of its most notable principles to guide the reader in a greater understanding of this theoretical framework. Each of these principles will be discussed in greater detail in the paragraphs that follow.



- The groups that individuals belong to serve as key sources of pride and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)
- Assumes a divided world of in-groups and out-groups (McLeod, 2008)
- The links and associations individuals have with social groups aids in the development of their social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988)
- The individual and the social group share attributes of each other (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007)
- Individuals consider themselves psychologically linked to the social groups of which they are members (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007)
- Individuals will behave similarly to the group with which they are members (Stets & Burke, 2000)
- Members of an in-group has a greater likelihood of participating in the group's culture and affiliate more closely with the group's behavior (Ethier & Deaux, 1994)
- Association with a social group can occur without interaction (Scott, 2007)
- Connections between an individual and a group can lead to beneficial behavior toward the group and/or prosocial behavior (Tyler & Bladder, 2002; Tidwell, 2005)

### **Social Identity Theory**

The decision to incorporate this theory into the theoretical framework of this study is twofold. First, social identity theory provides a framework that may be useful in

comprehending and understanding the manner in which alumni form attachments to the universities from which they graduated. Secondly, social identity theory can offer insight into the benefits that stem from these organizational attachments. Applied to this study, social identity theory suggests that through social identification the individual, in this case the alumnus, perceives themselves as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group, and therefore, shares a common destiny, as well as partaking in its successes and failures (Tolman, 1943).

At its core social identity theory posits that the groups to which individuals belong serves as a key source of pride and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). More specifically, social identity theory focuses on how people view themselves as members of one particular group (the in-group) compared to another group (the out-group) (Stets & Burke, 2000). In this instance, a social group is defined as a “set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view of themselves as members of the same social category” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p.225). Examples of these groups include social classes, gender, religious affiliation, sports teams, and alumni of colleges and universities (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; McLeod, 2008). The knowledge of belonging to a specific social category or group, and the associations that individuals maintain between themselves and the groups of which they are members, is what Hogg and Abrams described as an individual’s social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Further examination of social identity theory reveals several notable principles that are pertinent to this particular study. These assumptions include perceived connections between an individual and a group, and the shared attributes between each

(Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007). Boezeman and Ellemers explored the notion of shared attributes and determined that, over a period of time, individuals would eventually consider themselves as psychologically linked to groups and organizations of which they are members (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007). The authors also contend that individuals believe the characteristics that apply to the organization apply to themselves (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007). Each of these occurrences leads to the construct of an individual's social identity. In his article on organizational identification, Scott noted the growing relevance of social identity theory in research. He wrote, "Social identity theory has become firmly entrenched as a vital lens through which to understand issues of identity and identification as they relate to organizations (Scott, 2007).

In their quest to further explain social identity theory Stets and Burke noted that, "People behave in concert within a group with which they identify" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p.226). Considering this particular study, this statement provides an important linkage between traditionally educated alumni and alumni of an online bachelor's degree program. Prior research has shown that social identity theory is a viable lens to view the activities, beliefs, and potential actions, including their willingness to donate, of alumni or members of the in-group of a traditional college or university. Therefore, in order to reach accurate assumptions concerning online bachelor's degree alumni it becomes necessary to view them through the same theoretical lens. Albeit different from traditional alumni, online bachelor's degree alumni are linked to the college or university where they earned their online bachelor's degree. Examining this group through a social identity theory lens would categorize these individuals as an "in-group."

In their research delineating the differences between social identity theory and identity theory, Stets and Burke delve into the subtle nuances that exist within each. The authors expand on social identity theory's description of the "in-group" and the context of self-categorization that members of the "in-group" undergo. The authors argue that "the consequence of self-categorization is an accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members." (Stets & Burke, 2000, p.225). The authors go on to note that "this accentuation occurs for all the attitudes, beliefs and values, effective reactions, behavioral norms, styles of speech, and other properties that are believed to be correlated with the relevant intergroup categorization" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p.225).

Specifically dealing with the issue of actions and behavior, social identity theory suggests that individuals who categorize themselves as being a member of a group have a greater likelihood to participate in the group's culture and to affiliate more closely with the group regarding their behavior (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). Research conducted in the early 1980's examined alumni associations with their alma mater and found that the strongest predictor of alumni contributions stemmed from the emotional attachments to the alumni's alma mater (Beeler, 1982). The analysis of respondent data will help to determine if this particular facet of social identity theory holds true for online bachelor's degree graduates, as some may not affiliate closely with the in-group or institution.

In other words, as individuals form attachments to social groups, and further develop their social identity, they take on the beliefs and values of that group. Possessing a particular social identity translates to assimilation with a certain group and seeing

things from the group's perspective (Stets & Burke, 2000). This facet of social identity theory ties back to the first research question within this dissertation. The question asks "to what extent are graduates of public, non-profit online bachelor's degree programs willing to donate money back to their college or university?" It is widely known that many traditional alumni donate money to their alma mater. These alumni are part of an in-group that would be categorized as alumni donors. While stark differences exist within the educational experiences of online bachelor's degree alumni and their traditional alumni counterparts, there is evidence that suggests they can still be members of the same in-group.

Citing research conducted by Mael and Ashworth (1995) and Pratt (1998), Scott noted mounting evidence that "identification with a social category can occur without interaction" (Scott, 2007). Through the use of social identity theory as a theoretical framework, the first research question should shed light on whether online bachelor's degree graduates feel they are members of this in-group and to what degree they have assimilated to the in-group's beliefs, values and other properties. This unique characteristic may explain why social identification is one of the principle factors for participation in social initiatives and movements (Simon, Loewy, Stuermer, Weber, Freytag, Habig, Kampmeier, & Spahlinger, 1998). With regards to this study, the act of donating to one's alma mater would qualify as a social initiative.

Tyler and Blader provide additional insight into the theory behind social identity and developed logical conclusions that describe how connections between the individual and the organization eventually can lead to beneficial behavior (Tyler & Blader, 2002).

Tidwell echoed their conclusions when he wrote that social identity theory stipulates “that a participant’s organizational identification leads to increased prosocial behavior” (Tidwell, 2005, p.451) Within their research on the dynamics of human relations, Tyler and Blader stated that the social identification process links the individual to the organization and leads to cooperation to the degree that the organization bolsters the self-image of the individual (Tyler & Blader, 2002).

The authors add that favorable contributions to an individual’s self-image often result in feelings of pride and respect; two characteristics that “can lead to a range of behaviors that benefit the organization” (Tyler & Blader, 2002, p.771). The researchers place a great deal of emphasis on the powerful and motivating effects both feelings of pride and respect possess. These deep-seated emotions reveal the intense psychological elements that are embedded in this theoretical framework. Viewing this study through the lens of social identity theory reveals a direct comparison between improvements in an individual’s self-image and beneficial behaviors to the organization; and alumni pride and a willingness to donate money.

Research on social identity theory has shown that within the context of the relationship that exists between the university and alumni, strong connections and a positive self-image accompanying feelings of pride and respect will likely lead to rewarding behavior. Mael and Ashforth’s research found that college alumni who identify themselves closely with their college or university frequently engaged in prosocial behaviors on behalf of their alma mater that included financial contributions, informal recruiting, and attendance at school functions (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Through the social identity theory lens, this study aims to reveal if these feelings, actions, and behaviors extend to alumni that have graduated with an online bachelor's degree program. Concerning this study, the main benefits examined will focus on the online bachelor's degree graduate and their willingness to donate to their alma mater. However, I also contend that these benefits might also yield other non-monetary contributions that include attendance at university sponsored events, as well as donations of the alumni's time and talents towards other institutional initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

As the previous descriptions indicate, social identity theory views relationships with an organization from a psychological standpoint. The perspective of social identity theory posits that connections to a university, aid in the creation of a self-image and psychologically link the alumnus to said university. Serving as the theoretical framework for this study, social identity theory is an ideal choice for understanding individual and group dynamics. Furthermore, it will enable a more robust examination, given the nature of the topic being researched and population being evaluated.

As this review of literature has established, a large gap exists regarding research that focuses on the perceptions and philanthropic inclinations of online bachelor's degree graduates. While the primary aim of this study is to shed light on this growing population of alumni concerning their willingness to donate to their alma mater, it should also serve to help reveal the limited amount of research that been conducted on them as a group. In chapter three I will provide a detailed description of the research methods utilized in this study. Following this, chapter four will offer an analysis of the

respondent data and study results using social identity theory. Afterwards, chapter five will focus on the summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations for future research.



### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Graduates of an online bachelor's degree program, and their willingness to donate funds to their university, served as the focus of this study. Given the steady decline in state funding for higher education nationwide, and the enormous growth in online education at institutions of higher learning across the country, colleges and universities will need to develop tactics to capture the hearts and minds of these particular alumni. Through their perceptions, this study hopes to identify information that non-profit, public colleges and universities can use to better understand this growing population of alumni. Additional knowledge of this burgeoning group could lead to new strategies that colleges and universities can use to maximize the relationship with its online degree graduates.

This study was conducted utilizing the qualitative research method of inquiry. Creswell describes qualitative inquiry as employing "different philosophical assumptions; strategies of inquiry; and methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation" (Creswell, 2009, p.173). Qualitative research differs greatly from other research paradigms largely because of how information is obtained from participants, as well as the role the researcher plays in the overall research. The value-laden nature of this type of inquiry stresses the relationship that exists between the researcher and participants, as well as the situational factors that help shape the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Simply put, qualitative research refers to the concepts, descriptions,

definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and ultimately the meanings of things (Berg, 2007).

There were several reasons that led to the selection of a qualitative research approach for this study. As was mentioned in chapter two, an extensive review of literature yielded limited research on the topic of online bachelor's degree graduates and their willingness to donate back to their alma mater. What little research that had been conducted concerning online alumni was conducted utilizing quantitative research methods. Therefore, I felt it would be advantageous to conduct this study using a different approach in the hopes of obtaining new information. Another reason this study employed a qualitative research design was because of the unique qualities inherent within this method of research. Among other things, qualitative inquiry is often regarded as one of the most desired research paradigms due to its ability to offer thick, rich descriptions and delve deeper into social phenomena.

Furthermore, qualitative research is also “fundamentally interpretive,” meaning the researcher develops an interpretation of the data (Creswell, 1998, p.182). Given my role as the research instrument, and understanding my employment as a higher education fundraising professional, my past enrollment in several online courses, and my experiences as a donor to my alma mater, I felt my perspective would aid in my interpretation of the study's findings. In his book on qualitative research in educational settings, Hatch noted that researchers always engage their own intellectual capacities to make sense of qualitative data” (Hatch, 2002, p.148). Consequently, my perspective with regards to the study topic, the participants of this study, and their experiences is unique

and should ultimately add value to the overall interpretation and conclusions of this study.

### **Case Design**

The research within this study employed a case study design and focused on graduates of online bachelor's degree programs from the same university, as opposed to multiple universities. Specifically, this study utilized a single unit case study research design. This particular type of research design is often used in educational and psychological research. What differentiates single unit case study research designs from other formats is that phenomena is observed and studied using a single subject, or small group of subjects (Nock, Michel & Photos, 2007). Several characteristics exist that justify a single unit case study as an ideal format as opposed to a multiple unit case study. One justification lies in what Yin describes as the typical case, or common occurrence, that single unit case studies offer (Yin, 2009). With regards to this study, the single units of analysis are online bachelor's degree graduates from the same university. I have combined this single unit case study with the basic qualitative study that Merriam describes in her writings on qualitative research and case study applications (Merriam, 1998). Merriam qualifies the basic qualitative study as one which seeks to ascertain how participants perceive an event, phenomenon or process (Merriam, 1998).

Merriam further described a qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 1988, p. 21). Further analysis regarding case studies yields what Yin identified as two distinct and essential parts. His description stated that a case study was “an empirical

inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context” (Yin, 1994, p. 13). As it relates to this study, and using Yin’s definition as a backdrop, the graduates of online bachelor’s degree programs make up the real life context, while the phenomenon reside in their willingness to donate financially to the university from which they graduated. Therefore, the focal point of this study is to determine if online bachelor’s degree graduates from this particular university view themselves as part of the “in-group” (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) of traditional alumni and have a willingness to donate money back to their alma mater.

The case study design offers qualities that are highly suitable to this type of research. Case studies utilize distinctive questions that seek “an in-depth understanding about how different cases provide insight into an issue or unique case” (Morse & Field, 1995, p.25). Through the use of multiple in-depth interviews with online bachelor’s degree graduates, the case study design allows the investigator to get as close to the subject of interest, or phenomenon, as possible (Bromley, 1986). As was mentioned in previous chapters, published studies that examined the donating habits of online bachelor’s degree graduates do not exist. Therefore, this understudied population warrants further research. In addition to in-depth interviews, the researcher will attempt to obtain and analyze the giving histories of each participant to their alma mater.

During a discussion of his support for case studies as a viable unit of analysis, Yin wrote, “the variables are so embedded in the situation as to be impossible to identify ahead of time” (Yin, 1994, p. 9). Given the lack of knowledge that exists with regards to this topic, and population, there is no evidence with which comparisons and/or

predictions can be made. This presents yet another reason why a case study design is an advantageous endeavor. A case study design is ideal for this study in order to gain new knowledge that will likely differ from other research conducted in this field (Stake, 1981).

### **Case Description**

The university from which online bachelor's degree graduates will be chosen is a national, non-profit, space-grant institution and public metropolitan research university comprising of one main campus and several satellite campuses throughout a state located in the southwestern United States. The university enjoys an overall enrollment of over 73,000 students and the percentages of undergraduate and graduate students are 80.9% and 19.1% respectively (ASU Facts, 2015). The university maintains a residency of 68.7%, while 31.3% of the student body are nonresidents (ASU Facts, 2015). The population distribution by ethnicity of the student population is as follows: 57.1% Caucasian, 20.1% International, 10.0% Hispanic/Latino, 4.6% Asian, 3.5% Black/African American, 1.3% American Indian/Alaska Native (ASU Facts, 2015). The university offers more than 300 academic undergraduate programs and majors, all of which are fully accredited by the North Central Association of Higher Learning Commission (ASU Facts, 2015).

As the largest university in the state in which it is located, the case institution maintains a prestigious reputation and garners a large following, both athletically and academically. The case institution was founded as a teacher's college in 1885 and reached university status in the early 1960's (Goral, 2015). In recent years the case

institution has embarked on a number of new initiatives in an attempt to become a more diverse and less exclusive university (Ripley, 2015). These initiatives have resulted in large increases in students who come from low-income families that total nearly 40 percent of the entire student population (Ripley, 2015). The case institution has also experienced significant growth in its online bachelor's degree programs. The university's online program began in 2010, currently enrolls 13,000 students and enjoys one of the highest retention rates in the nation (Ripley, 2015). Under the direction of its new president, the university is attempting to brand itself as "A New American University" (Fischman, 2014, p. 293).

A public, non-profit, traditional four-year university was sought from which to identify and interview participants. The rationale behind this decision was twofold. First, there are currently a limited number of colleges and universities in the U.S. that have created structured online degree programs, especially online bachelor's degree programs. The university selected for use in this study is a recognized leader in the development of its online degree programs, both bachelor's and master's degrees. The university has created, and continues to operate, numerous bachelor's and master's degree programs that can be completed entirely online. Furthermore, the university's online enrollment has experienced considerable growth within the last five years. In fact, the growth it has experienced has warranted the construction of a campus that is entirely dedicated to the administration and delivery of its online courses and degree programs.

While there are private institutions that do offer online degree programs, none appear to share the same size, scope, range of academic disciplines and prominence as

the public university selected for this study. Attempts were also made to identify a for-profit university where online bachelor's degree programs are plentiful. I reached out to three well known for-profit universities in the U.S. to ascertain if they had alumni that would be appropriate for this study, as well as organized development operations designed to attract and stewards alumni contributions and donations. After speaking with several university personnel at each for-profit university, I was surprised to learn that there was no department or employee charged with the responsibility of building relationships with alumni and raising private funds from them for the university. Having learned this I chose not to pursue studying this type of institution as they do not appear to have plans towards developing a fundraising program, or fundraising initiatives. These findings made the selection of a for-profit college or university an inappropriate choice.

### **Purposive Sampling**

Due to the nature of this study, and the specific requirements of those needed to participate, purposive sampling was chosen as the sampling strategy. The rationale behind the selection of this sampling method resides in the necessity for participants with a specific set of experiences. Therefore, the success of this study hinges on the selection of a precise group of individuals who have: (1) graduated with an online bachelor's degree, and (2) from the same university. As Patton noted, purposive sampling is best suited for information rich cases and enables phenomenon to be studied in greater depth (Patton, 1990). Patton also believed that this sampling strategy allowed the researcher to learn vast amounts of information that is central to the purpose of the

research (Patton, 1990). Purposive sampling is an obvious choice given the nature of this study topic, and due to the immediate need for additional information and understanding. As Erlandson et al, explained, “Purposive sampling...increases the range of data exposed and maximizes the researcher’s ability to identify emerging themes” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993, p. 82).

### **Population**

Undergraduate alumni were chosen as the population of participants for this study. The rationale for focusing on this particular group of alumni is due to mounting research indicating closer affiliations between alumni and their undergraduate alma mater than that of any other institution where a higher degree was earned (Clotfelter 2003; Gaier, 2005; McDearmon and Shirley, 2009). The population of this study included twelve participants who were purposively sampled based on their graduation with an online bachelor’s degree from the same public four-year university described in the case description. The method of online course delivery is being sought in order to examine a population of graduates whose college experience differed from the norm in that few, if any, courses were taken on campus in a traditional classroom setting.

Regarding the gender and ethnicity of the twelve participants, seven were male, five were female, and they included a mix of ethnicities. Current employment, while not directly related to the study topic but perhaps serving as a mitigating influence, was a socioeconomic characteristic that each of the participants shared. Furthermore, the age among participants ranged from 27 to 54. The online bachelor’s degrees earned by the participants included majors in applied sciences (2), criminal justice (1), health science



(1), liberal studies (1), nursing (1), political science (1), psychology (3) and sociology (2). In addition, each of the participants graduated in one of the following years; 2012, 2013 or 2014.

### **Instrumentation**

Within this study the instrument was the researcher. As the primary instrument, I was cognizant that my own personal perspectives concerning the phenomenon may impact the way I viewed, analyzed and interpreted the data. While I did my best to encapsulate these personal perspectives, I found that I shared many of the same feelings, and in some cases experiences, as the participants in this study. As a student who has, in the past, completed several online courses I felt I had the ability to relate to my participants in a manner that added value to the study. Given these experiences in the virtual classroom, as well as my familiarity with alumni and alumni donors, I categorized my role as the research instrument as a “participant-observer” (Yin, 2009, p.111).

### **Procedures**

Two rounds of interviews took place with twelve participants that lasted approximately one hour each. The first round of interviews included approximately 15-20 questions, each of which were asked in a semi-structured interview format. The second round of interviews included three questions which were also asked in a semi-structured interview format. Noting the advantages of semi-structured interviews, Hays & Singh wrote that semi-structured interviews enabled “more participant voice” and

provided “a richer picture of a phenomenon under investigation” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 239). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews provide a more open interview format and allow the investigator to explore themes as opposed to adhering to a strict set of questions. Additionally, semi-structured interviews allow the participant to divert from a rigid set of questions and explore new ideas and perceptions.

While other types of interview questions exist, I chose a style that would provide me and the participants with the greatest flexibility, yet help to remain as closely tied to the study topic as possible. This therefore, excluded several popular interview formats such as structured interviews and informal conversational interviews. I determined structured interviews were not ideal for this study because they prohibited further exploration of topics and themes mentioned by the participants. I chose not to employ informal conversational interviews because I feared the interview would lack the necessary structure to keep both me and the participant focused on the study topic. Given the limited research that has been conducted on online bachelor’s degree graduates, I felt confident a semi-structured interview format would help maximize the time I spent with each participant, as well as increase the depth and validity of participant responses.

### **Gaining Entry**

The process of obtaining twelve participants for this study began with identifying an ideal public, non-profit, four-year university that offered at least one online bachelor’s degree program. The university selected meets all of these criteria, as well as offering multiple online bachelor’s degree programs. After identifying this university, I contacted the assistant vice president of the university’s online and extended campus. I

informed him of the topic of this study and he immediately expressed interest in the subject matter and was very willing to help me identify appropriate participants. After gaining IRB approval through Texas A&M University, I sent a copy of the approval letter to the individual whom I had made contact with and sought approval at the participating university whose online bachelor's degree graduates would later serve as participants for this study.

Upon approval from the participating university, the assistant vice president of the university's online and extended campus ran a query of all online bachelor's degree graduates. Next, he exported this information into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and provided me with a copy. Upon receiving the information, I utilized the randomization function within Microsoft Excel which completely randomized the information within the spreadsheet. This technique was conducted in an attempt to achieve a high level of randomness with regards to the participants selected. Starting from the top of the newly randomized Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, I then began sending "study participation request" emails to the randomly selected list of online bachelor's degree graduates. I ceased sending out study participation requests at the point when I had received confirmation from twelve participants stating their intent to participate in this study.

Fearful that this study would face participation challenges similar to recent study findings of a 30-year decline in participation rates (Galea and Tracey, 2007), I realized the likelihood of each graduate choosing to participate could be low. To combat this I contacted multiple individuals seeking their participation in this study. While seeking participants, every effort was made to include equal numbers with regards to gender,

race, and age. Once twelve participants agreed to participate, and had sent signed consent forms, I ceased my attempts at finding additional participants. During my search for participants an alternate was identified should one of the twelve original participants selected be forced to drop out of the study.

### **Data Collection**

Individual interviews are the most widely used method of data collection in qualitative research and are the preferred technique to collect data on unexplored social phenomena (Hays & Singh, 2012). For this reason, individual interviews were the primary method by which data was collected in this study. Each respondent participated in two interviews and were asked a similar set of questions during each. In addition to employing a semi-structured interview format, I also used an interview guide to structure my interviews. By utilizing an interview guide to prepare my list of questions, it helped ensure that similar topics were explored with each participant. In setting up the interviews I made sure that every effort was made to conduct each interview at a time that was appropriate and free of distractions for both me and the participant. Each of the participant interviews were conducted over the telephone and through the use of video conferencing. Specifically, eight of the interviews took place over the telephone and the remaining four utilized Skype or Facetime video conferencing software. Each interview took approximately one hour to complete and were audio recorded to ensure accuracy during the transcription process.

The decision to conduct individual interviews with twelve participants, from the same university, was made in an effort to provide greater depth into the participant's

perceptions of the experiences, connections and level of association they had with their specific university, as well as their willingness to give money. The fact that each of the participants has earned an online bachelor's degree, from the same university, as well as the number of graduates selected, represents my attempt to increase trustworthiness and reliability by integrating an appropriate level of sampling adequacy.

### **Interview Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine graduates of an online bachelor's degree program and gauge their willingness to donate money back to their alma mater.

Participant answers and perceptions were gained through the use of semi-structured, individual interviews utilizing the set of questions listed below. The questions were created with the theoretical framework of social identity theory as the underlying premise. While developing these questions my aim was to ascertain the following: (1) if the participant's felt an association, and/or affiliation, with their alma mater, (2) how their experiences inside and outside the online classroom affected this association, (3) how these experiences affected their willingness to give to their alma mater, (4) how their association affected their willingness to give to their alma mater, and (5) do they currently give, or plan to donate, to their alma mater?

The rationale behind questions of this type was to ascertain if online bachelor's degree graduates share any of the associational connections, donor motivations and donor habits as traditional alumni. In chapter two information was included that pertained to traditional alumni and these particular characteristics. I, therefore, felt it necessary to develop a line of questioning that would enable me to answer the research

questions set out in chapter one, that were created utilizing the core principles of social identity theory, and the answers of which would provide useful data to conduct comparative analysis to existing research on traditional alumni.

Each participant was asked a similar set of predetermined questions. I made the decision that the questions would not be offered to the participants prior to the actual interview. I felt that allowing the participant's time to read and consider the questions might increase the likelihood of false or exaggerated responses. Therefore, interview questions were introduced to the participants during the interview in an attempt to achieve a greater level of reliability in the responses. Because the participants were not given the interview questions in advance, which would have provided them time to consider their responses, I realized this approach might not capture as much information. Thus, I utilized the interviewing technique of member checking which I believed would provide the participant the opportunity to add anything he/she felt was pertinent that they might have forgotten to mention during the interview. A complete list of the questions that were asked of each participant, during two rounds of interviewing, are provided in appendix A.

### **Data Analysis**

Multiple formats exist for managing and analyzing data in qualitative research. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe data analysis as a process of reducing data, displaying data, drawing conclusions, and verifying results. Merriam (1998) simplified the process when she wrote that the goal of data analysis in a case study is communicating understanding. This understanding culminates from a thorough analysis

of participant data, other participant observations, the perceptions of the researcher, how the data links to social identity theory, and eventually how it relates to existing research on the topic. As was described in chapter two, the theoretical framework utilized for this study is social identity theory. With social identity theory as the underlying theory through which this study was designed, and the overarching lens through which the data is viewed, I have grounded my analysis on social identity theory and its core principles.

Merriam (1998) viewed data analysis as an ongoing process done in conjunction with data collection. Her recommended process for data management in a case study begins with the culmination of all interview transcripts, field notes, etc. (Merriam, 1998). Upon the completion of each interview I took field notes focusing on the interaction that took place. The use of field notes allows the researcher a chance to describe the interaction that took place during the personal interview, as well as offer personal insights into anything that he/she felt was meaningful, applicable or impactful. Therefore, field notes offered me the opportunity to record my own personal perceptions of each interview.

In addition, transcripts were developed for each interview with the assistance of audio recordings. I prepared each transcript and verified the accuracy by utilizing the audio recorded interviews. The transcripts and field notes were gathered, along with member checking corrections and edits, and peer-debriefer notes. Great care was taken in the organization of the data retrieved from participants and the approach I utilized was developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Each interview transcript was broken down into

data units that related to both the research questions of this study and their relation to social identity theory.

The data units were then printed on 4"x6" cards, analyzed, and grouped into themes that were categorized by topic. I then grouped the themes into larger categories and identified the relationships between them. Once organized in a retrievable fashion, these materials comprised what Yin categorizes as the "case study data base" (Yin, 1994, p. 194). After the data was organized I conducted a thorough review of the data in order to edit information, remove redundancies, and began the process of fitting parts of the data together (Merriam, 1998). The results of these efforts will be outlined and explained further in chapter four.

Once the data had been collected and properly organized I began the next phase of data analysis which consisted of coding and thematic development. In my approach to coding the data and developing themes I coupled the use of social identity theory with the outline developed by Boyatzis which includes: (1) code creation, (2) theme identification, (3) theme description, and (4) theme caveats (Boyatzis, 1998). Code creation is the process of categorizing similar text or keywords, as well as connecting them to other text or keywords that influence one another (Hays & Singh, 2012). The actual code that is assigned to specific texts or keywords represents a label for the large amounts of data that is collected. Taking the coding process a step further, Merriam described coding as occurring on two levels, identifying information about the data and interpreting constructs related to analysis (Merriam, 1998). Hays and Singh explained codes as being descriptive or interpretive and noted that they can be labeled emic codes



(by the participants), or etic codes (by the researcher) (Hays & Singh, 2012). The authors also suggest creating a codebook that lists each code, as well as provides a definition and description (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Themes are patterns of codes or codes that have been compiled or “chunked” together to more adequately describe phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). The authors further explain theme identification as a process of implementing connecting strategies to identify relationships among codes (Hays & Singh, 2012). Theme description is the process of applying an explanation of the theme as it relates to the codes from which it derives. Theme caveats describe the process of identifying connections, if any, the theme has to other themes. Theme caveats would also attempt to identify any anomalies that might exist among the isolated themes.

After the transcribed data from interview transcripts was broken down and coded I began the process of identifying categories using components of the theoretical framework, social identity theory. The identified categories included: (1) participants who feel a part of the “in-group,” (2) participants who do not feel a part of the “in-group,” (3) participants who feel associated with their university, (4) participants who do not feel associated with their university, (5) participants who donate to their university, and (6) participants who do not donate to their university.

### **Trustworthiness and Triangulation**

Trustworthiness is the term applied to a researcher’s attempt to “persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.290). In other words, it is the process a researcher

involved in qualitative research goes through to inject truth, applicability, consistency and neutrality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the course of this study several efforts were made in an attempt to enhance the level of trustworthiness. One such strategy that was utilized is triangulation. Triangulation is an approach used by researchers where several sources are sought to provide insights and descriptions about the same events, or relationships (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993).

The driving force behind triangulation is that “it enhances meaning through multiple sources and provides for thick description of relevant information” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993, p. 115). Put another way, triangulation attempts to obtain a 360 degree view from multiple perspectives in order to gain the clearest representation of phenomena possible. There are several efforts that can be made in order to accomplish this. Patton identified specific approaches such as observations, interviews, documentation and analyzing the consistency within data which would enable a triangulation of data to occur (Patton, 1987).

Additional efforts were taken to increase the trustworthiness and reliability of the data collected. One such effort was through the use of member checking, a key strategy for establishing trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Member checking involves the ongoing participation with study participants to ensure the researcher has captured their intended meanings (Hays & Singh, 2012). As it relates to this study, member checking was employed after each interview when participants were asked to review the interview transcript. Each participant was emailed an electronic copy of the interview transcript and asked if the material was an accurate portrayal of their responses, experiences and

perceptions. They were given the opportunity to omit data they were uncomfortable revealing, as well as adding any additional information they felt was relevant to the study.

Given that the researcher is an integral part of the research being conducted (Hays & Singh, 2012), field notes were also kept throughout the duration of this study. Field notes were taken immediately following each interview and were used to aid in the description of pertinent facts and observations surrounding the interaction. Some examples of what might be included in field notes could include the participant's surroundings (i.e. home or office), the attitude of the participant during the interview, any distractions that might have taken place during the interview, the perceived focus of the participant, or anything in particular that gained the attention of the researcher.

An additional element aimed at reducing the researcher's bias is the career experience of the investigator. The investigator has been employed as a development officer for a public university in Texas for over six years. During his tenure he has dealt with all aspects of alumni giving, ranging from small annual fund gifts to large contributions that qualify as major gifts. The researcher's years of experience in this field offers an advantage to the study and serves as another measure that increases reliability and trustworthiness.

Lastly, the investigator sought the contributions of a peer-debriefer. In this study, the peer-debriefer was in a unique position to offer a great deal of credibility, as she has taught both undergraduate and graduate level online courses and has served as a development officer at a public university in Texas for several years. The peer-debriefer

served to review interview transcripts and field notes and provided feedback concerning consistencies, and discrepancies, within the data. As Hays and Singh conclude, triangulation helps to ensure trustworthiness by utilizing multiple forms of evidence at differing times within the course of the study to better support the findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). Each of these strategies were employed at different times within the course of this study and were done so in an attempt to achieve the highest feasible level of trustworthiness possible concerning the data collected.

### **Research Positionality**

The researcher and author of this study is currently employed as an executive director of development at a public university in Texas. The office of development, for which he serves as executive director, is responsible for all manners of fundraising for the university. In addition to this, the researcher has over six years of higher education experience in raising funds in the form of annual fund donations, mid-range and major gift contributions from alumni and friends of the public university for which he is employed. While not having earned any type of online degree, the researcher has enrolled in graduate and doctoral level courses that have been administered via online format. Furthermore, the researcher has earned a graduate certificate that was delivered entirely online from a public university in Texas. Understanding that the researcher is a part of the research process, and in this case works as a development officer at a public university in Texas, notes will be kept to log the investigator's personal perceptions and experiences throughout the development of this dissertation.

## **Limitations**

This study takes a unique approach to the study of online bachelor's degree graduates and their willingness to donate money to their alma mater. The most obvious limitation exists within the inclusion criteria. To begin, the number of respondents is low and, therefore, limited to the information that these particular participants provided. Interviewing a greater number of students from this institution would likely yield richer descriptions and additional recurring themes embedded within their responses. Another limitation resides in the selection of one university. While the inclusion criteria for the institution was based entirely on public institutions offering online bachelor's degree programs, a broader examination at a larger number of institutions would be more advantageous.

Additional limitations exist with regards to the selection criteria of this study and its exclusion of private institutions of higher education in Texas. Private colleges and universities share similar populations of distance education students and are experiencing similar growth trends with regards to online offerings and enrollment (Weiss, 2011). Given these similarities there is good reason to believe that meaningful input could be derived from interviewing individuals within this group.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of online bachelor's degree graduates and gauge their willingness to donate money back to their alma mater. In the preceding chapters a brief historical view has been provided concerning the impetus behind the introduction of fundraising in higher education. I have also provided

the specific elements of the problems surrounding the intent of this study. These problems include a steady decline in state and federal funding for higher education, the critical need for additional sources of funding, the phenomenal growth in online education that is outpacing traditional higher education classroom instruction, and few if any efforts to tap into the fundraising potential of online alumni.

In addition, I have offered information regarding the selection of the theoretical framework, social identity theory, which has been utilized in this study along with details supporting this decision. Furthermore, a literature review has been included citing literature and research that addresses each identified problem area. In this chapter I have discussed the qualitative methodological components of this study and have included a discussion concerning the study's design, elements of data analysis and approaches that will be utilized to increase trustworthiness.

In summary, online education in the United States is the fastest growing segment of higher education (Hsu 2008). Colleges and universities have been urgently seeking alternative sources of funds in an attempt to sustain their mission, prominence and prestige. Yet little, if any, discussion, strategies, or initiatives are underway to tap into the alumni that stem from its fastest growing segment. In chapter four, I will introduce the findings of this study and attempt to explain their meaning. In chapter five I will further discuss the findings of this study and apply the findings to recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

The preceding chapter described the overall methodology of this study, as well as its design features and characteristics. Information in the previous chapter also serves to link the methodology of this study to the research questions and theoretical framework. With the description of this study and its parameters in place, chapter four focuses on the data collected from participants, its analysis, and the various findings from the research conducted.

The purpose of this study is to examine graduates of an online bachelor's degree program and gauge their willingness to donate money to their alma mater. The data was organized and analyzed using Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory as a guiding theoretical framework to better understand the relationship between a willingness to donate and organizational associations and affiliations. There were three research questions that served as a guide for this study:

- 1) To what extent are graduates of public, non-profit online bachelor's degree programs willing to donate money to their college or university?
- 2) How do their virtual classroom or instructional experiences as students enrolled in online bachelor's degrees impact their willingness to donate money to their college or university?

- 3) Additionally, how do their non-instructional experiences inside and outside the virtual classroom impact their willingness to donate money to their college or university?

The interview questions I developed for this study were inspired by a combination of my research questions and the theoretical framework of social identity theory. Through the interview questions, and the theoretical framework of social identity theory, I discovered a number of categories that helped answer the research questions posed in this study. During the analysis of the identified categories, and subcategories, themes began to develop that resonated throughout the various categories. The themes that emerged from this study will be discussed and detailed within chapter five.

### **Participant Information**

Twelve individuals participated in this study. These twelve participants all graduated with an online bachelor's degree from the same case institution described in the previous chapter. Table 1 provides additional information regarding the participants year of graduation, academic discipline or degree, age, gender, as well as background information concerning whether the participant was employed while enrolled in their online bachelor's degree program. In an attempt to conceal the identity of the participants in this study, each has been assigned a pseudonym. Figure 2 provides a visual which illustrates the number of participants by gender. As figure 2 shows, five participants were female and seven participants were male. Figure 3 displays a graphic of the range of online bachelor's degrees represented among the participants, as well as



the number of each. In addition, figure 4 shows the age range of the participants, as well as the number of participants that fall into each age range.

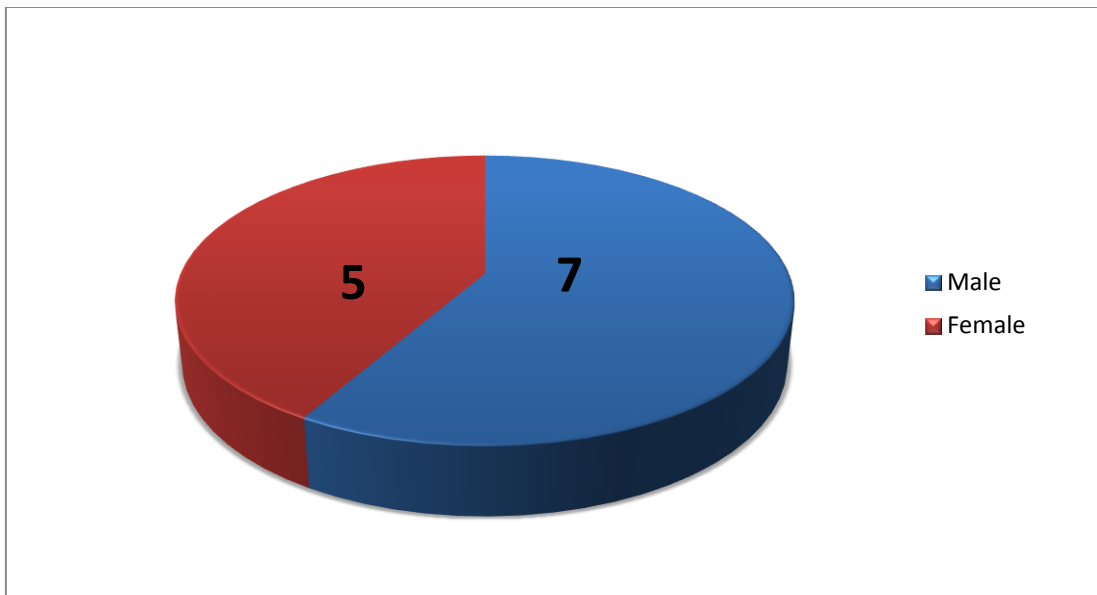
*Table 1      Demographics of Study Participants*

<b>First Name</b>	<b>Last Name</b>	<b>Grad. Year</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Back-ground</b>
Cameron	Blake	2014	Sociology	20-25	Male	AWW
Paul	Dupree	2014	Psychology	45-50	Male	AWW
Kenneth	Edwards	2014	Political Science	35-40	Male	AWW
Sydney	Jane	2014	Psychology	20-25	Female	AWW
Mary	LeBlanc	2014	Health Science	40-45	Female	ANW
Avery	Lorraine	2014	Criminal Justice	20-25	Female	AWW
Joel	Louis	2013	Applied Science	30-35	Male	AWW
Ethan	Moseley	2012	Applied Science	35-40	Male	AWW
Lindsey	Nevels	2012	Liberal Studies	50-55	Female	AWW
Aiden	Russell	2013	Psychology	20-25	Male	AWW
Craig	Turnage	2013	Sociology	30-35	Male	AWW
Wini	Walker	2012	Nursing	25-30	Female	ANW

*AWW – attended while working*

*ANW – attended not working*

*Figure 1      Gender of Study Participants*



*Figure 2      Bachelor's Degree of Participants*

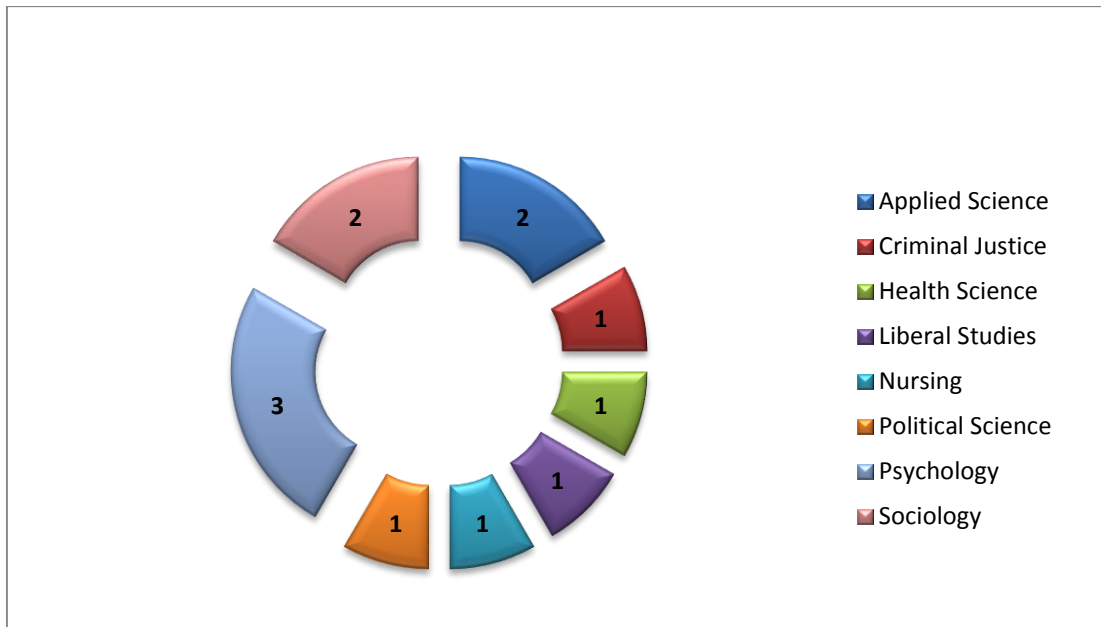
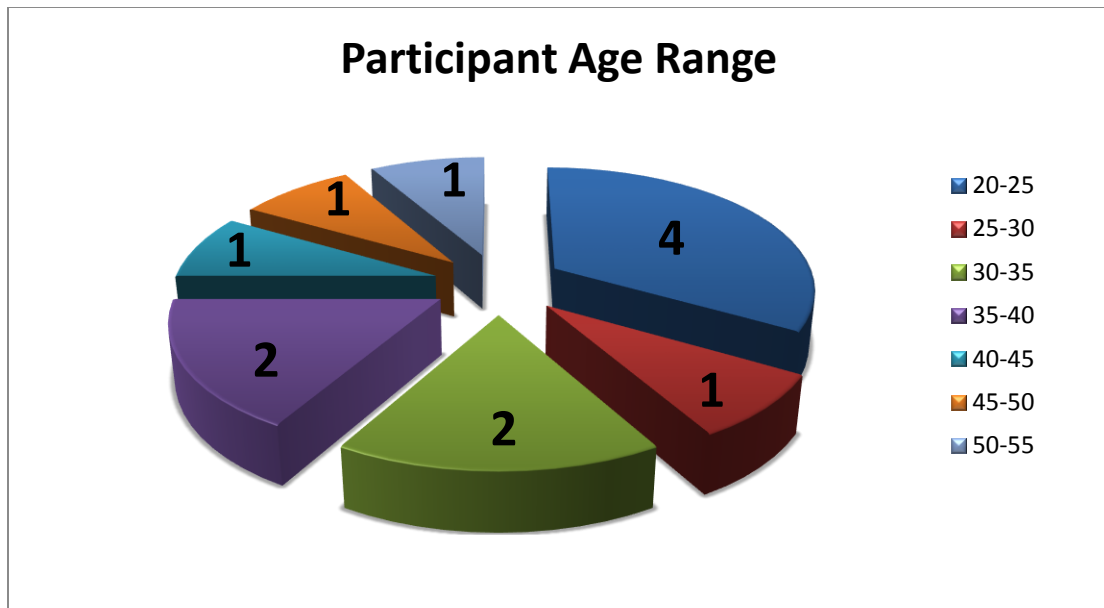


Figure 3 Age Range of Participants



### Data Configuration

Upon analysis of the participant data several categories and subcategories emerged. In an attempt to present this data in a logical and organized fashion, and utilizing the research questions as a guide, I have grouped related categories into four separate sections. Each section contains a number of categories and subcategories so that the reader can more easily follow the natural progression of the data and gain as much insight into the participant responses as possible. The four sections are titled: (1) Willingness and Association, (2) Instructional Experiences, (3) Non-Instructional Experiences, and (4) Additional Factors. Each of the four sections will be introduced by a brief description of each of the categories and subcategories they contain. Table 2 provides a visual concerning the categories and subcategories that emerged from the participant data in this study. The first column is titled “Categories” and lists each of the

specific categories that materialized, while the second column titled “Subcategories” identifies the subcategories that were notable and arose within each category.

*Table 2            Categories and Subcategories*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Subcategories</b>
<b>Willingness to Donate</b> (9/12)	<b>Current Donor to their Alma Mater</b> (3/12) Past Donor to their Alma Mater (6/12)
Unwilling to Donate (3/12)	Not a Current or Past Donor to their Alma Mater (4/12)
Philanthropic Inclinations (6/12)	<i>none</i>
Associate/Identify with their Alma Mater (8/12)	Feel Part of the In-Group (8/12)
Do Not Associate/Identify with their Alma Mater (4/12)	Do Not Feel Part of the In-Group
Impressions of their Alma Mater before Enrolling (10/12)	<i>none</i>
University Contact (12/12)	Soliciting for Donations (11/12) Maintaining Contact after Graduation (12/12) Attempts to Forge Relationships (7/12)
Positive instructional Experiences (10/12) Negative Instructional Experiences (3/12) Maintaining Contact with Students (12/12)	
Positive Non-Instructional Experiences (11/12) Negative Non-Instructional Experiences (3/12)	
Student Treatment (7/12) Negative Stigma Regarding Online Education (7/12) Factors that Could Lead to an Increased Willingness to Donate and/or Associate (11/12)	

## **Willingness and Association**

Within this section are categories, and subcategories, that emerged from participant data which relate to the participant's willingness to donate to their alma mater, as well as their level of association with their alma mater. The first category is titled "Willingness to Donate" and includes two subcategories titled "Current Donor to their Alma Mater" and "Past Donor to their Alma Mater." The next category discussed is termed "Unwilling to Donate," which includes the two subcategories "Not a Current Donor to their Alma Mater" and "Not a Past Donor to their Alma Mater." Following this is another category entitled "Philanthropic Inclinations" which includes data relating to the participants' philanthropic intent directed towards other organizations with which they associate. These categories highlight the participant's actual willingness to donate, whether or not they are current or past donors, as well as gain additional perspective as to their overall philanthropic inclinations towards other organizations with which they associate.

The second half of this section deals with the participant's level of association with their alma mater, the impressions they have of their alma mater and the various methods used by their alma mater to maintain contact. This portion of the section is led by a category titled "Associate/Identify with their Alma Mater" and includes a subcategory titled "Feel Part of the In-Group." The next category is termed "Do Not Associate/Identify with their Alma Mater" and is accompanied by the subcategory "Do Not Feel Part of the In-Group." The following category is entitled "Impressions of their Alma Mater before Enrolling." The final category within this section is titled "University

Contact” and includes three subcategories designated as “Soliciting Donations,” “Maintaining Contact after Graduation,” and “Attempts to Forge Relationships.”

### **Willingness to Donate**

Nine of the twelve participants revealed that they were willing to donate to their alma mater and their reasons behind their willingness to donate varied greatly. While most of the participants expressed a willingness to donate to their alma mater, many had stipulations tied to their willingness to contribute financially. These stipulations ranged from a lack of finances, to a sense of obligation for what the university had done for them, to reservations that their donations might be applied to areas they don’t support. And while some offered details, other participant responses were succinct and provided little explanation as to why they were willing to donate. A prime example would be the response given by Wini who mentioned, “Yes, the willingness is there and I’m sure I will donate more in the future.”

In stark contrast, several other participants revealed very specific, and sometimes rather personal, details that are associated with their willingness to donate to their alma mater. While the desire to donate to their alma mater existed, one such issue that several participants noted played a role in preventing them from donating was their personal finances. In her response, Mary touched on her current financial struggles when she mentioned, “My willingness is there, my financials are not. So I would be very willing to donate to the university if my financial situation was different. I think it’s an excellent university.”

Another participant who expressed similar financial hardships was Craig. Craig had graduated in 2013 and was in the early stages of a new career. While admitting he had few resources with which to donate, he described the duty he believed he had to the university and future students. He mentioned:

At some point in the future, once all that debt is paid off and once I have gotten more established in my career, and I'm moving forward and I have excess, I think that participating by donating money and helping to propagate that becomes part of my social and academic responsibility.

When asked to if he would delve deeper into the subject of the responsibility he felt to donate to his alma mater, Craig stated:

I recognize the contribution that the university has made to me as an individual and I understand that by getting involved and taking up the responsibility of giving money back to the university, even though I paid for my degree, I'm helping someone else and I'm helping the next generation of students come up and have the same opportunities that I did, if not more. So I think that I am apt to give money. The only holdback I have as far as giving money, and participating in that way, is that right now I have all this student debt and don't have money to give. At some point in the future, once all that debt is paid off and I have gotten more established in my career and I have excess, I think that participating

by donating money and help to propagate that becomes part of my social and academic responsibility.

Apart from a lack of monetary wherewithal, other participants also spoke of a deep sense of obligation to the university for the impact it had made in their lives. While Craig mentioned a sense of obligation to donate that was tied to the overall university, others explained that their obligation was tied to the particular program from which they graduated. When speaking about her willingness to donate to her alma mater, Sydney noted the difference in her sense of obligation:

I feel that I'm connected through the online program in general. I feel the need to support that mode of education since I'm a byproduct of that. So, I would support any actions to bolster that program. And I would obviously bolster the arts program. I actually never participated in the arts program at my alma mater, that's just my own personal soapbox in life. So I would support the arts program. I would also support my program, the psychology program, either brick and mortar, or the online program itself. I feel connected in that sense.

A few of the participants who expressed a willingness to donate to their alma mater coupled their willingness with concern for the ultimate use of their contributed funds. Adding to her response about the sense of obligation she felt, Sydney also noted her reservations about making a future donation:



I would be willing to donate money to my alma mater if I knew what it was going towards. I have a general argument against schools where a lot of fundraising money goes to sports, science and mathematics. I'm a person of the arts, so I'm very trepidatious to just blindly donate money. If I knew that it was going towards the arts program I would be willing to donate for sure. As long as I know it's not going to go build a new football stadium, then I'm good.

Accurate information from their alma mater, regarding the areas where their donations are applied, as well as those who benefit from them, appeared to be a major concern for several participants. Along the same lines as Sydney, Kenneth expressed similar reservations about donating when he mentioned, "So I don't know if my donations actually help online students. I don't know how many scholarships they get." While Kenneth mentioned his apprehension to giving, due to a lack of information regarding contributed funds, it did not appear to dissuade his willingness to donate in general. For example, Kenneth later mentioned:

I think that going to my alma mater was a step that I needed to take to get to where I needed to be. Without that I don't know where I would be, if I hadn't had that opportunity, because they didn't have to take me. I didn't have great grades or anything like that. The assumption is that they take everybody. Yeah, I will continue to donate if it is within my means, and I have in the past.

While the previously discussed reasons represented the majority of the participants who revealed they had a willingness to donate to their alma mater, a couple of participants expressed motives that were somewhat more altruistic in nature. Departing from the reasons discussed above, Avery noted that her willingness to donate to her alma mater stemmed from her connection to the school and her overall sense of philanthropy. In her response she mentioned:

Yeah, I definitely want to donate. It's a great tax write off and it makes you feel good. And, you're helping others. So if I'm gonna donate money, yeah I want it to be towards my school who gave me my education.

***Current Donor to their Alma Mater.*** While analyzing the data surrounding the participant's willingness to donate to their alma mater a relevant sub-category emerged. This sub-category includes the participants that currently donate financially, in some manner, to their alma mater. Three of the twelve participants in this study revealed that they were current donors to their alma mater. Two of the three noted that they were currently donating towards their alma mater's alumni association, while the other was making contributions that supported the academic department from which they received their degree.

Noting that he was a first generation college student, Cameron recalled a recent donation made through his alma mater's alumni association. Cameron stated, "They were asking if I would donate as part of the graduating class gift to the scholarship fund

for first generation college students. I did give \$100 to that scholarship fund.” Joel was another participant who was currently making donations to his alma mater’s alumni association. Specifically, Joel mentioned his recent alumni association lifetime membership donation. Joel said, “Yeah, I paid for the lifetime [university mascot] membership. The university made me feel a part of the university, even though I was an online student. That makes me feel like a [university mascot].”

***Past Donor to their Alma Mater.*** Another pertinent sub-category that emerged from the analysis of the participant data, involving their willingness to donate to their alma mater, dealt with a number of them that were past donors. Six of the twelve participants revealed that they were past donors to their alma mater. Their reasons for giving varied much like those in the previous sub-category. Most gave towards the alumni association, like Wini who noted, “I’ve become an alumni for life and I’ve donated here and there in different ways.” A few other participants donated towards the academic department from which they earned their degree. Kenneth provided a good example when he stated, “they have a new school that is part of the Liberal Arts College. That’s what they called initially for a couple of years ago and that’s when I gave them a hundred bucks.”

***Unwilling to Donate.*** Three of the twelve participants responded that they had no willingness to donate to the university. Several recurring ideas emerged among this small group of participants that did not have a willingness to donate to their alma mater. These ideas included a lack of emotional ties, the high cost of tuition, and the perception

that other organizations would be a better steward of their financial contributions. In his response, Paul provided a blunt response:

My alma mater holds no emotional place in my heart and I never consider giving money. I have recommended the online programs to quite a few people, some of whom have actually enrolled and are now happy. My alma mater is huge and doesn't really need my money. It never occurred to me that my \$200 donation would make a difference; it's a drop in the bucket. I donate to homeless shelters and my kid's school. These organizations come across as always needing money. So I'm willing to help them. It never occurred to me that the money I had to give would have any impact at my alma mater. Someone on their end should make a better case, or perhaps a documentary or something to explain why I should donate. Until then, my heart will not be moved. And furthermore, the tuition was high enough that I don't feel I owe them anything.

While sharing a similar sentiment, Ethan felt as though his alma mater was a business, or enterprise, and likened it to a for-profit university. He believed the university would derive little benefit from any financial contribution he could make. He detailed his perceptions in his response:

I viewed my alma mater as a company, as a corporation, or an enterprise. I went to the company and I feel like I would if I had gone to the University of Phoenix. It's an educational business, but it's still a

business. They are profiting so I don't see the need for me to donate money to the business. So that's the reason why the willingness to donate is probably lower. That's the reason why I am not as willing to donate to the actual university.

Another reason behind a lack of willingness to donate to their alma mater resided in what several felt was the high cost of tuition. Interestingly, several participants made this claim, however, only two of the participants fell into the category of not possessing a willingness to donate. Adding to his unwillingness to give Ethan mentioned the unfairness of the fees placed on online students. He added, "online students pay an additional fee that traditional students don't pay." Noting his unwillingness to give based on high tuition, Aiden emphatically offered the additional response, "I feel I gave them more than enough money in tuition." The tone in his response made it evidently clear that he did not feel he owed the university anything, would likely never donate to the university and nothing, it seemed, would ever change his mind. Alternatively, Kenneth was one of the participants who agreed that the cost of tuition was high but also noted that he was still willing to donate to his alma mater. During one of his responses Kenneth mentioned, "I wouldn't mind giving back to the school that gave to me, even though I paid them a lot in tuition."

***Not a Current or Past Donor to their Alma Mater.*** While analyzing the data surrounding those participants who were not willing to donate to their alma mater an applicable sub-category emerged. This sub-category focused on the participants that

currently do not donate financially, and never have in the past in any manner, to their alma mater. Four of the twelve participants in this study revealed that they were not current or past donors to their alma mater. Each of these participants mentioned that they never felt led to donate in any way. One of the participants, Joel, made an interesting comment that was worth noting when he said, “I haven’t done anything like that, but I definitely feel there are opportunities to donate.” Outside of the fact that he is not a current or past donor, this is an important statement because it uncovers two important characteristics that are relevant to this study: (1) the fact that the university is making an effort to develop opportunities and initiatives for alumni, and (2) he is aware of the university’s efforts and attempts, yet still refuses to donate.

When questioning these participants most simply mentioned that they were not current donors, and a few even went so far as to state that they never would become donors. Towards the end of the first round of interviewing I was able to gather additional information from most of these participants concerning the reasons why they chose not to currently donate to their alma mater. The additional information they provided was obtained through a few specific questions that yielded responses which were more closely linked to a later category titled, “Factors that would lead to an increased willingness to donate.” While these responses were better correlated with this forthcoming category, there are indirect links to this particular sub-category and should be considered.

## **Philanthropic Inclinations**

There is an assumption that most people have philanthropic intentions, however recent research has suggested the opposite (DellaVigna, List & Malmendier, 2012; Andreoni, Rao & Trachtman, 2012). The philanthropic nature, or lack thereof, among participants in this study was another interesting finding that warranted the creation of a category. The importance behind the creation of this category resides in the fact that it helps to further categorize the participants within this study. As we consider these participants and their willingness to donate to their alma mater, their willingness is, to some extent, validated if they have demonstrated that they do in fact have a history of donating money to other organization's with which they associate and/or identify. This is not to say that a willingness to donate to their alma mater is discredited if they lack a history of donating to other organizations, it simply adds to the reliability of the study findings.

Put another way, I wanted to see if these participants put their money where their mouth was, and actually made donations rather than just making the statement that they had a willingness to donate. Amongst the general population there are those who are inclined to donate, and those who are not. While there is no fault among those who do not donate, for the purposes of this study, I wanted to identify the participants who identified themselves as non-donors, yet still noted a willingness to donate to their alma mater. Another reason for this category's development was to ascertain if participants were willing to donate to other organizations with which they associate and/or identify, but not their alma mater. Should this be the case the finding would have important

implications for future research to determine the reasons why alumni would give to other organizations but not their alma mater.

Concerning their philanthropic inclinations, the participants were evenly split among those who donated to other organizations with which they associated and/or identify, and those who do not. Among the participants who indicated that they did not donate to other organizations with which they associate, little was offered within their responses other than to note that they did not donate to any entity and had little intention of starting. Paul was one of the participants who did in fact give to other organizations he associates with, but not to his alma mater. During the interview he mentioned:

I give time and some money to the local homeless shelters because I feel like they could use my donations. If I can donate \$200 I know that makes a difference. The larger organizations that I identify with, like the democratic party, sometimes I feel like my \$200 wouldn't make a difference. So I would rather give my money and time to my kid's school, or homeless shelters, or wherever it really feels like it makes a difference.

Sharing a similar sentiment, Cameron mentioned, "I place giving money back to the church and charitable organizations above giving back to my alma mater." Craig also mentioned how he devotes a portion of his donations to his church. Craig noted, "I tithe to the church, which as a Christian it's kind of a part of what I do and I think it is an important aspect of it." Like Cameron and Craig, several other participants mentioned



their devotion to donating money to their church, as the church represented the largest recipient of donations from the participants who revealed that they regularly donate.

### **Associate/Identify with their Alma Mater**

Eight of the twelve participants identified themselves as having an association with their alma mater. Some of the participants relayed their basic feelings of an existing association with few additional details. For instance, comments made by Ethan were representative of the feelings and comments made by several other participants. In his response, Ethan mentioned, “I do feel the pride of being an alumnus of my university. I represent it. I follow the team. It’s all there.” Joel shared similar feelings with regards to the association he had with his alma mater. He mentioned:

Other than watching football on television and rooting for the university, and wanting to be a part of that forever, I wouldn’t say there was anything greater than just being associated with the university in general. That excites and intrigues me and I like being a part of the university because of that.

Paul’s association with his alma mater differed from Ethan’s and Joel’s, in that it didn’t focus on, or relate to, the athletic components of the university, but rather the academic elements and the degree that he earned. He stated:

It’s where I got my bachelor’s degree. I initially started in 2001 and dropped out, and eventually came back and got two bachelor’s degrees in

short order when I came back to do it online. So I feel connected because I did not do so well at my other attempts at other colleges. So I feel connected in that sense. I am also currently enrolled in a master's program here, so I kind of feel part of it in that sense as well.

However, other participants provided substantial explanations surrounding the deep seated association and affiliation they maintain with their alma mater. During her response Mary mentioned:

I've just thought about it off and on and it's really probably the only thing I truly identify myself with outside my kids. It's probably one of my greater accomplishments and it's just a school that carries a great name and it was a great goal for me. Mary expanded on her response and added: I don't really associate with a whole lot, to tell you the truth. Because of my experience in getting a degree and because it was something I had always promised myself, it is kind of the first thing I felt prideful about in mentioning. The other things that I associate with are my work, and that's what I do. But I don't know that they are as personal as the degree was for me. And that could be because I'm an older student. There is another variable for you. But it's the first time I've ever wanted to have a bumper sticker or a sweatshirt with a name on it. This is the first organization that I wouldn't mind being identified with. I was surprised with myself in the past that I even considered getting a university

sweatshirt, but I told myself that would be my reward after I graduated.

And I did buy one.

While Mary's association revealed her pride in the university, it also exhibited the depth of pride in herself for achieving such a noteworthy accomplishment. Other participants extolled their pride in their university's national prominence and prestige. Sydney's response provides a good example:

Just the size of the university, because it's so large and it's so well known around the country. I feel also more quick to say "yeah, I'm an alumnus," versus saying I'm an alumnus of my other school just because it's not as well known. So my university is an easier identifier as well. So all of that kind of works into my identify more quickly.

***Feel Part of the In-Group.*** While analyzing the data surrounding those participants who identified themselves as having an association with their alma mater, an applicable sub-category emerged. This sub-category focused on the participants who feel a part of what Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory described, the "in-group." Specifically speaking, within this study the "in-group" is the alumni association of the participants' alma mater. While there were varying levels of association among these participants, eight of the twelve participants felt, on some level, as if they were part of their alma mater's alumni association. Wini provided a good example of a strong association with the "in-group" when she said:

I am a member of the university's alumni association. So that's my community, that's my school. I like that I get email invitations from the

alumni association and there is a group here in Utah, so it was nice that I was able to connect with those people and go to athletic events when they play against Utah. There's a good little group here in Utah, which I would say is a positive influence.

Included in her response detailing why she felt a part of the "in-group," Avery linked her feelings of inclusion to the amount of hard work she completed, as well as her overall pride in the university. She stated, "I do feel like I am part of my university's alumni. I worked hard for the degree I received and I take pride in my college." Viewing her association in a different light, Sydney noted her alma mater's prominent role in the community and its culture. While describing why she felt a part of the "in-group" she mentioned:

Yes, I would say that I do feel a part of the university's alumni base. I think it has a lot to do with the university being such a big part of the local community. So it's kind of like the big guy in town. So I think it's just so prominent in the city's culture. I feel it's more tied into my identity in general and I think that lends credence to being a graduate of that university and feeling like an alumnus.

While the previous responses provide examples of strong affiliations with the "in-group," other participants revealed weaker links to said group. A prime example is found in Aiden's comments. Although admitting he feels a part of the "in-group" his description clearly affirms the weakness of his connection:

I feel part of the university alumni because I graduated from there. That is the sole requirement to be an alumnus in my book; having graduated from the university. One does not need to pay money to join a club that will then ask you for more money in order to be considered an alumnus. You get a degree from a university and you are an alumnus of that university.

### **Do Not Associate/Identify with their Alma Mater**

Four of the twelve participants declared that they had no association with their alma mater. While not a majority, these four participants represent a third of the total population of individual who participated in the study. Therefore, their perceptions are noteworthy and important to consider when developing themes and implications. Each of the four participants relayed their points of view regarding the lack of association with their alma mater and provided additional insight as to why. Interestingly, while analyzing the data I noticed very little redundancy among their responses. With regards to this particular topic, Paul provided some of the most robust feedback and shared several comments that, while overlapping, appeared to echo throughout the responses of several of the other participants whose feedback fell into this sub-category.

During his response he said, “I run into people that have graduated from my university and it takes me a minute to realize that actually so did I, and I really don’t feel like I am part of that community. The online thing really kind of made me feel very isolated and remote.” When I delved deeper and asked Paul why he felt this way he responded:

Well I didn't live in Arizona. I was much older than the average student, I didn't really identify with being a graduate of any certain school. I'm in my mid 40's. I didn't grow up anywhere near there. It's just that I needed to get a degree and it was good for what it was. I got a lot out of the program and I was happy with what I got, but I didn't participate in anything that had anything to do outside my coursework, or that had any of my university's identity to it. My online experience was amazing and yet it formed zero bond between me and the institution. So if you're looking to establish what effect it has on people, and my effect is as good as any, then there is no connection. There really is no emotional connection that I have with my alma mater.

Focusing more on the association he maintains with the graduate school he will soon be attending, Cameron also felt no connection to his alma mater. When asked to elaborate on his lack of an association he stated:

When I leave my mark as a professional I'll be able to say I'm a graduate of Loyola University in Chicago [the participant's graduate school] and I'm qualified to do this because I went there and studied with these people. My alma mater just qualified me to go there."

Later, during the course of the interview, Cameron went on to say:

To me it was like I was having this experience with people online somewhere. It could have been South Harmon Institute of Technology. My mentality throughout the whole thing was, ‘yes, I’m trying to learn but the end goal is that piece of paper that says bachelors of science.

Other participants, such as Lindsey, were very direct and to the point. When asked about her association with her alma mater she mentioned:

I’m not sure what that means, ‘do I feel like I’m an alumnae?’ I know I graduated which makes me an alumnae. I’m not emotionally connected to the university, meaning I hold no loyalties, if that is what you are asking.”

Kenneth’s feedback represented yet another perspective that dealt with institutional, and academic rigor. Noting his lack of association with his alma mater he mentioned:

I think in rankings or standing my alma mater is still like a party school and in my group, or organization, I guess it’s more prestigious to say that you went to school at Pepperdine in terms of educational rigor, I suppose. Immediately when people hear of my alma mater they think you just ran around Mill Street and partied it up.

***Do Not Feel Part of the In-Group.*** While analyzing the data surrounding those participants who acknowledged that they had no association with their alma mater, a fitting sub-category surfaced. This sub-category focused on the participants who did not

feel part of, what Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory described, the "in-group." As a reminder, within this study the "in-group" is the alumni association of the participants' alma mater. Four of the twelve participants noted that they did not feel part of the "in-group." These particular participants felt as though no connection existed between them, as individuals, and their alma mater, and therefore, there was nothing that linked them to the "in-group." Hence, there was no psychological link to the "in-group" and little likelihood of their participation in the group's culture or behavior (Ethier & Deaux, 1994).

When asked to provide details surrounding his feelings of not being part of the "in-group," Paul said, "I actually don't feel a part of the alumni. Like I said, I just don't see myself as an alumnus. My alma mater doesn't really spark anything within me when I see the sports team or anything like that." Offering a similar response, and noting his lack of participation, Kenneth stated, "I haven't done much to connect with other alumni to make me feel like part of the group." Noting her lack of involvement and membership in her alma mater's alumni association, Lindsey mentioned her lack of connection. During her response she stated, "I'm not a member of the alumni association so I don't think of it as an association. I'm not part of that group."

### **Impressions of their Alma Mater before Enrolling**

During the analysis of the participant's responses I identified several that spoke of the favorable impressions they had of their alma mater before becoming a student. I found this interesting and wanted to see what impact, if any, this might have had on their subsequent association and/or identification with their alma mater. Ten of the twelve



participants indicated that they had a favorable impression of their alma mater before enrolling in classes. Lindsey simply stated, “I wanted a school with a good reputation and that is why I chose my alma mater.”

Noting specifically the online bachelor’s degree programs, Ethan said, “Through my own research I knew that my alma mater was a recognized online school. I had researched in the past other universities but I had not heard of one as good as my university.”

Offering another unique perspective, Mary described how attending a graduation ceremony helped to form a favorable impression of her alma mater. She stated, “I had visited about 15 years ago for a graduation and maybe that had some influence on me. My boyfriend’s niece had graduated from there. But it’s always just had a good reputation in my mind.” Avery noted the beautiful campus as helping her form a favorable impression. She mentioned, “the campus was beautiful and I really liked the program.” Avery also revealed another notable finding that was shared by several of the other participants. She mentioned, “The thing that really sold me was the fact that, once I received my degree, no one would know that it was completed online.” I learned from several of the participants that the case institution did not have separate degrees for any of the online degree programs. Hence, unless an alumnus told you, you would have no way of knowing by looking at their degree that they completed it entirely online.

In his response, Craig spoke of an aspect of his alma mater that no other participant mentioned. He revealed that before he enrolled in the online bachelor’s degree program at this alma mater, he was a manager at a retail store in the same town as

the university. He noted the impact that students, and his student employees, had on his decision to enroll and his impression of his alma mater. Craig stated:

The campus and the students were a part of my day-to-day life back then and so when I finally did go back to school it seemed like a logical place for me. It felt right and the curriculum and programs felt right. Their presentation seemed far more meaningful and it was better suited to what I wanted to accomplish academically.

Kenneth made comments that were also shared by several other participants. He revealed that he had previously attended the University of Phoenix, as did several other participants. His acceptance into his alma mater, given what he felt was a poor academic start from a less than reputable university, was the chief reason behind the formation of his favorable impression. Kenneth said, “I think it was overall because I was able to get into a program that accepted me from the University of Phoenix, and even before that my credits were pretty bad. I was appreciative of that.”

Yet another unique perspective concerning the cultivation of a favorable impression of his alma mater was provided by Joel. Joel was genuinely touched by the marketing campaign that his alma mater created and he attributes his enrollment to hearing radio commercials for the online bachelor’s degree programs. He stated:

I choose my alma mater because I heard the commercial and I looked into it and I thought “wow, I could totally be a [university mascot] and earn a

degree from there.” I didn’t even know a full blown online program at this university existed until I heard that radio commercial.

### **University Contact**

During the two rounds of interviews several questions were asked of each participant that inquired about how the university contacted them after graduation. In particular, the questions asked if their alma mater had sought to solicit donations from them, what methods of contact their alma mater used, and if the participants felt their alma mater had attempted to forge a relationship with them. Because of the interesting findings within their responses, the creation of a category directed at university contact was warranted.

***Soliciting for Donations.*** When asked if their alma mater had made attempts to solicit donations from them, the overwhelming majority of participants agreed it had. Eleven of the twelve participants remember getting phone calls from call centers staffed by current students, electronic fundraising appeals sent via email, or printed fundraising brochures that were sent through the mail. The fact that the participant’s alma mater actively sought, and asked, for donations is a critical component of the donations they eventually received. Several studies have highlighted the importance of the act of asking for the gift. Individuals have been shown to give in greater numbers and at higher amounts when the donation is actually solicited rather than not (Li, 2015).

Alternatively, when the “ask” is not made, or when an entity does not make a clear and concise pitch to potential donors, fewer donations are received. As the purpose

of this study stated in the introductory paragraph, this study aims to examine graduates of an online bachelor's degree program and gauge their willingness to donate funds back to their alma mater. As a professional fundraiser in higher education, I believe that a portion of an individual's willingness to donate resides in whether or not they were actually asked. The act of being solicited for donations not only increases the likelihood of obtaining a greater number of donations, it also ignites many different precursors to the act of actually giving.

Perhaps the most notable precursor to making a donation is being made aware of the initiative(s) for which funds are being raised. A major component of raising funds, besides making the actual request for the donation, is making your potential donors aware. If they are unaware of a project or an initiative's existence they will never donate to it. Another precursor to donating is educating potential donors of the importance of the project, or initiative, for which funds are being raised. Donors must be made to feel like their contributions are going to something that will be impactful and meet an important need. Yet another precursor to donating is linking the donor to the project, or initiative. Linking a potential donor to an initiative involves tapping into their interests and personal passions. Each of these components are critical to fundraising success and are the focal point of any fundraising campaign. Therefore, it was necessary to ascertain additional information concerning if, when, and how the university solicited donations from the participants.

During his interview Cameron made comments that reinforce the importance of soliciting funds from alumni. He stated, "I donated as part of the senior class gift that

goes toward the scholarship fund.” Later he pointed out that had they not asked he likely would not have donated. Joel made additional comments that speak directly to the importance of the university actively soliciting its alumni for donations. He mentioned, “if the opportunity struck me right and I was sent an invitation to donate to a cause I agreed with I would.” Another comment made by Kenneth demonstrates several of the characteristics of donating listed above, specifically awareness and linking the donor to the project. Kenneth stated, “They have a new school that is part of the liberal arts college. That’s what they called initially for a couple of years ago, and that’s when I gave them \$100. This year they called for the same thing and I gave them \$100.” When asked what he thought of the tactics the university used to solicit donations, specifically the use of students to raise annual fund donations over the phone, Kenneth said, “I think it’s cool to talk to the actual students because they are the ones that are actually doing the drive. It’s really nice and it’s cool to hear from them. They are young and they are trying to push for their education.”

Offering a different perspective, Lindsey provided details of an attempt, by her alma mater, to raise funds from her that negatively impacted her association. Lindsey stated:

I’ve gotten calls to join the alumni association. And we really don’t participate in university activities. We don’t go to football games, we don’t go to basketball games, we don’t do that so it really had no benefit for me, and I didn’t see the value in it.

The questions that were asked of her over the phone by the individual who was soliciting funds on behalf of the university made her feel as though they did not know anything about her and that they were only interested in her money. She felt slightly offended that no one had taken the time to see that which she had been involved in the past. Lindsey also provided details regarding the measures that were taken by the university to alter its fundraising approach:

They kind of changed their tactic on me and rather than asking me to give to the university they started targeting me for the school of letters and sciences, and more importantly the interdisciplinary department.

While the experience left her slightly agitated, Lindsey went on to say, “I probably wouldn’t pay as much attention to email or mail as I do the phone calls asking for donations. So by them calling it’s more effective because they get my attention.

***Maintaining Contact after Graduation.*** All of the twelve participants noted that their alma mater had attempted to maintain contact with them after graduation. The participants mentioned that they routinely receive university event related invitations and information, alumni news and updates, and fundraising appeals in the mail, through electronic mail and over the telephone. Many commented that they were happy to receive the information because it kept them somewhat informed about events and happenings on campus. Several also mentioned that it served as a link of sorts to the university in general. Describing her perspective on the university maintaining contact Wini mentioned:

I think they are very good about looking for different ways of staying in touch without being overbearing about it and keeping me involved in things that are changing and things that are going on through different outlets without it being overwhelming in any one right.”

Noting other types of contact Lindsey mentioned, “I get emails occasionally about university events and then letters from the president.” During his interview, Joel provided specific details regarding the type and frequency of his university contacts. He mentioned:

I probably get two or three emails a week from the alumni association, both notifying me of events and thanking me for being an alumnus, and encouraging me to continue my education to get a master’s degree. I get the university alumni magazine in the mail and probably three to four times a year I get some email literature from the university.

Highlighting additional ways that the university maintains contact, Kenneth cited the increased use of social media. He mentioned, “The alumni association for Orange County uses LinkedIn and Facebook and gets in contact with everyone and tries to organize several types of events in Orange County.” Noting the success of the various types of university contact, Craig stated, “I feel like the alumni association definitely has done its part to reach out to me and that the Orange County chapter of alumni have reached out to me a couple of times as well.”

*Attempts to Forge Relationships.* Seven of the twelve participants in this study felt as though their university had made an attempt to forge a relationship with them after graduation. When asked, some of their responses were brief and lacked substance. For example, Avery stated, “I do feel like the university has made an attempt to forge a relationship with me.” Others offered more substantive comments that provided details of the university’s actions that influenced the way they felt. Cameron noted, “Yes, I feel like they have tried to forge a relationship with me. Just the other week they emailed about being a mentor to online students.”

Citing the enormous size of his alma mater, Aiden revealed that he understood the challenges his alma mater faced in trying to forge a relationship with so many alumni, even though he felt to a small degree that the university had attempted to forge a relationship with him. He said:

I think that they have tried but considering their size it’s hard to forge personal relationships with 70,000 people. To a very small degree, yes I feel they have but not enough to be worthwhile. A few nameless emails are not really much in the way of relationship building.

In her response, Mary made similar comments:

Yes, I feel like the university has attempted to forge a relationship with me. On a scale of 1 to 10, maybe about a 4. But it’s no way in a personal type of outreach to me. It just seems your run of the mill wanting money that you would get from any kind of an organization.



Avery remembered receiving survey requests from her alma mater asking for her opinion and perspective. She also mentioned that she appreciated the university asking her for feedback on issues that she felt were important:

More recently, they have reached out and contacted me via email to take surveys regarding my experience at the university. The surveys ask what they could do to improve satisfaction amongst students and increase student participation. I feel these questions are asked so they can improve and forge stronger relationships with students in the future.

During her interview, Lindsey mentioned that she recognized the university was making attempts to forge a relationship with her, however she felt it wasn't oriented specifically to her and that she believed it was generated for a mass audience. Lindsey stated:

They coordinated a couple of pizza events. I think they did them at least once a semester, or two or three times a year. It was kind of like a "come on and be part of the university" type of event. To me it seemed like they were trying to engage the online students as part of the student body. Quite frankly, I just didn't go. One, I didn't really have time at that point in time, and two, it just wasn't my scene.

From our interview together, I gathered that she appreciated the information but realized it wasn't really doing anything for her and therefore, saw little benefit in receiving it. She went on to say:

Whether or not there is any benefit to the relationship, I would say no.

They at least reach out a bit. If I were to take the time and read all the emails I would know about the things going on. So they do try and forge the relationship. I'm not responding well because I just don't see any benefit in it.

In her mid to late 50's, Lindsey was the eldest of the participants in this study. Based on her two previous comments, I felt as though her age played a role in the lack of response she was giving towards the attempts her alma mater was making in forging a relationship with her. Based on her responses and tone, and my experience with alumni, I believe the likelihood of her participation would increase assuming the university approaches her in a different manner or develops an engagement opportunity that was more age appealing and appropriate.

### **Instructional Experiences**

This section contains three categories that emerged from the participant data which relate to the participant's instructional experiences, or experiences that occurred within a virtual classroom setting. The first category is titled "positive instructional experiences" and the second category is termed "negative instructional experiences." Lastly, the third category in this section is designated as "maintaining contact with

students.” These three categories highlight both positive and negative participant experiences that took place within the virtual classroom setting, which include interactions with professors and classmates.

### **Positive Instructional Experiences**

Ten of the twelve participants mentioned they had very positive virtual classroom and instructional experiences while enrolled at their alma mater. These participants specifically noted the quality of the professors and their responsiveness to student needs, their satisfaction with the curriculum and courses offered, as well as the friendships and comradery that developed among classmates. The feedback contained within this category stems mainly from an interview question that asked if there was, “anything, positive or negative, that occurred within the virtual classroom/instructional setting that would impact your willingness to donate to your alma mater?”

Lindsey’s comments provide an ideal example of the bridge between the participants’ positive experiences within the virtual classroom and the impact it has had on their willingness to donate to their alma mater. She stated:

The value-add that I see is to do what I can to help the area of the school that I went to remain, because it impressed me that much. So it wasn’t the university per say, it was the quality of the teachers, it was the curriculum that I took and it was the subject matter. I’m very engineering oriented. I like math and the sciences and I see things very black and white. They really taught me how to see grey. There was one class I took on the signs

of Star Trek, or something like that. It was kind of fun. It taught about the different symbols that there were in ancient times and the symbols you see now. And I thought it was interesting because they pointed out some of the areas where it's racist. And it had never even occurred to me that that could have been construed as racist. So now I sit there and I watch and one of my favorite movies happens to be very racist. It doesn't change the fact that it is still one of my favorite movies but now I see how it can be portrayed as that. And I would have never looked at it that way had I not taken that class.

She ended her comments with the following:

The ones who communicated well and came across as very excited about what they were teaching, when I think about it, it was really their influence in the whole program that has prompted me to donate money to the university and actually interdisciplinary studies. Not to the university as a whole, but to the department itself.

Sharing similar sentiments regarding his positive virtual classroom experiences, Ethan commented that what he was taught, and how it was taught to him, changed his perspective. He said:

To date, and it's not much, I have donated \$400 to the interdisciplinary program in the school of letters and sciences. And I do that because I

liked the program. I liked what it was they taught. I liked how they brought different things together and the fact that my perspective on things changed by going through the degree program. And that's big because I'm old and I'm set in my ways.

Citing more than just the academic degree program, Mary noted the efforts made by specific faculty members. She mentioned she felt they went above and beyond the call of duty, especially when considering that the efforts were being made for an online student. Mary said, "I had an excellent experience with the professors, which was quite a nice surprise. I even had a professor that drove in and met me somewhere to go over things with me. It was a positive experience. The education was excellent and I'm pleased." While not as specific as Mary, Sydney shared similar feelings. She stated:

It does affect my willingness to donate. I would say my interaction with my professors, being positive and being very interested in my professional growth and development, makes me willing to donate to the university. That would be the biggest influence within that context.

Craig mentioned opinions similar to the previous participants concerning the quality of courses and faculty. However, during his response he and Paul focused more on the friendships that were made and the comradery experienced during the virtual classroom/instructional setting. Craig stated:

I did a group project with students from around the world. There was one student where we took several of the same classes together and even though he lived in Japan, he was U.S. born, and was trying to finish his degree. We did group projects which was an amazing thing having never met this person face-to-face, and we struck up a bit of a friendship. And there were several other students where that was the case. We got to work together virtually, which was really an eye opening experience.

Paul noted his similar experiences to Craig and noted that he still maintains friendships with several classmates. Paul said:

I made a couple of friends that have remained friends past my time at my university. So, that was kind of nice even though we never spent time in a real classroom together. I have befriended a couple of students.

### **Negative Instructional Experiences**

While the number of participants who cited a negative virtual classroom and instructional experience was low, it is worth noting. Of the twelve participants, only three had experiences that garnered enough negativity to mention to me during our interviews. Interestingly, the three negatives center mainly around the challenges that are inherent in developing a good rapport and meaningful relationship with their professors. When asked about positive and negative experiences within the virtual classroom, Ethan did not have to think long before providing a response. He stated:

There is one drawback to being an online student, aside from the social stigma that exists around it, which is caused mostly by people not understanding how great online education can be, is that I didn't necessarily generate the same level of interaction or familiarity with my professors. I found myself, after I had graduated, needing to get a letter of recommendation and kind of having difficulty because I hadn't built up that rapport with any of my professors. It did strike me at the time as "oh, this is one of the drawbacks, this is one of the things that the institution, and all online institutions, need to find a way to overcome, or as a student need to find a way to overcome."

Cameron had a near identical experience to that of Ethan. When recounting his negative experience he mentioned:

This reminds me of a specific experience that I had that negatively impacted my willingness to donate. I had asked a professor of mine, who I had taken three separate courses from, to write me a recommendation letter for a graduate application I was submitting. She kindly wrote back and told me that due to the context in which we knew each other (i.e. through online courses) she did not feel comfortable writing me a recommendation, as she did not know me well enough. This took me by surprise as I had made extra efforts outside of class to connect with this professor, sending her articles I had found that connected to what we

were learning that week, emailing her questions and asking her about subjects that were extended past the content for the week... This event negatively affects my willingness to donate to the university over my other college as I felt that my brick and mortar school took more time to build a relationship between my professors and myself, granted that was in an easier setting. But overall, that was an instance that I felt somewhat un-invested in by my alma mater and thus, less willing to donate.

Expanding on his responses Ethan also mentioned other facets of the online student/online professor relationship that he felt needed improvement. He added:

A lot of the professors there predate online education and even though they are at an institution that's really driving online education, they are still new to it and they are still not sure how to interact with online students in the same way that they do with their traditional students.

This was a common complaint amongst each of the participants who expressed negative virtual classroom experiences.

### **Maintaining Contact with Students**

Every participant in this study mentioned that they had been contacted by the university on numerous occasions while enrolled in their online bachelor's degree program. The creation of this category was necessary given that every participant noted being contacted while enrolled. It is also necessary because of the detailed responses



provided by the participants, which were overwhelmingly positive. The most consistent method of contact identified was through the university's academic counselors, sometimes referred to as academic coaches. Almost every participant mentioned being contacted by these academic counselors, and all of them that remembered being contacted by an academic counselor spoke very highly of the experience.

While commenting on the manner in which his alma mater contacted him while enrolled as a student, Joel said:

90% of the time it was via email and every once in a while I would get a phone call. Usually from a counselor, I forget the exact titles, but just like an academic advisor making sure everything was going ok and seeing if I needed anything, or if I was struggling anywhere, how they could help. I probably got some regular mail too when I think about it.

While sharing similar sentiments, and noting the positive experience he had and the support he gained as a result, Kenneth was able to remember the name of the academic coach that contacted him. Detailing his experience, he noted:

I talked weekly, or maybe bi-weekly, with a coach from the university. He had nothing to do with specific courses, he was my student advisor and was literally like a coach that served kind of like a cheerleader. It was kind of cool. It was really supportive. His name was David. He would talk to me and ask me how I was doing and how my grades were. And

again, he wasn't just making sure I was doing well in my classes, but that I was doing ok personally. I could see the distinction.

Sydney shared similar experiences as well and added, "For the telephone it was advisory and in a support capacity. For example, they would ask 'how are you doing,' 'how are the courses coming along,' 'do you feel prepared for your exams?' The telephone was always more of a support system. Sydney also mentioned that in addition to general campus and course information, she also started to receive information regarding the alumni association. She said, "In email, it was much more varied. It could be course information, it could be an advisor reaching out with financial aid information, alumni network information, or more informational stuff." Joel related a similar experience with regards to the type of contact and information he began receiving as he neared graduation. Joel stated, "I would say that the last year that I was there I would get a lot of stuff from the university's alumni association encouraging me to join, benefits for joining, things like that in regular mail form and email."

### **Non-Instructional Experiences**

This section contains two categories that emerged from the participant data which relate to non-instructional experiences, or experiences that occurred outside the virtual classroom setting. The first category is titled "positive non-instructional experiences" and the second category is termed "negative non-instructional experiences." These two categories highlight both positive and negative participant

experiences that took place during occasions that were separate from those that occurred within the virtual classroom setting.

### **Positive Non-Instructional Experiences**

Eleven of the twelve participants expressed positive out-of-class, or non-instructional, experiences while enrolled at their alma mater. Several of these positive comments revolved around university athletic events and the attractiveness of the university's campus. The participants also noted other factors that led to positive out-of-class experiences. These other factors included friendships that have extended outside the virtual classroom, as well as other support they received from the university through the academic advisor, or academic coach.

When recounting his experiences, Kenneth mentioned the impact that attending a graduation ceremony, and other athletics events, had on him. He said:

Going to the graduation ceremony helped me and made me feel a little bit more like I was part of the community there, as opposed to an outsider looking in. So that was a fun experience for me. And I attended a couple of sporting events when I visited a friend who lives out there. That was fun. Again, feeling like I was a part of things and participating as part of the community.

Having lived in the same city as her alma mater, and being familiar with its settings and facilities due to athletic, entertainment and work related training events,

Avery mentioned the positive experiences she had, and pride she felt, while giving a campus tour to her sister. She stated:

I've been to university games and walked around the campus numerous times. I gave my sister a tour of the campus. It's a beautiful campus and everyone I've ever met there was very friendly. So even though I was online I still had an out-of-classroom experience there.

During the interview with Paul he mentioned experiences that sound as though they should be included in the category "positive instructional experiences." However, in describing his experiences he notes the outcome, which he felt should be classified as a positive out-of-class/non-instructional experience. Paul stated:

I would just say, I'm in my mid-40's, across the board it always stood out that those students who are non-traditional, or later in life students, were a lot more active and motivated and really took over the class in terms of leadership. There were always two or three of us and we quickly became friends and we really were the driving force in every discussion. I have stayed in touch with a couple of professors who are really nice people. So I would say the only thing outside of class was that I made some friendships that have lasted past that.

Cameron mentioned events and experiences that also could be included in the previous category "positive virtual classroom experiences." However, he qualified his

interactions and positive experiences with the academic coach as an out-of-class experience because he was referring to incidences that occurred before he was enrolled.

Cameron noted:

I would say the interaction with the academic coach strengthened my association. I couldn't tell you either of their names but the fact that I had somebody that I knew was looking at my progress and knew my background at some point was helpful. The initial enrollment advisor was actually really helpful during the process because I signed up for classes pretty late in the game. He was really helpful.

### **Negative Non-Instructional Experiences**

Three of the twelve participants expressed negative out-of-class/non-instructional experiences while enrolled at their alma mater. Two of the three participants revealed that their negative out-of-class/non-instructional experiences stemmed from attempts their alma mater made at soliciting donations from them while still enrolled. The third participant described his negative experience as one that occurred with the academic counselors. While only three participants provided specific incidences detailing their negative out-of-class experiences, it is important to note that several other participants mentioned negative experiences probably took place during their time as a student, but they were unable to remember them specifically. Each of the three negative out-of-class experiences are detailed below.

Recounting her negative out-of-class experience that involved a call from a university employed student fundraiser, Avery stated:

When I received this phone call I had finished all my classes but had not yet graduated. The first one was a male and he called to congratulate me on my upcoming graduation and he wanted to see what my next steps were going to be as far as my career. Then he asked me if I had a job, and I explained “yes, I have been working all through school, which is why I chose my alma mater’s online program.” Immediately following that question he asked me for a donation. It upset me.

As she continued to talk about this negative experience, Avery mentioned how upset she was at another interaction she had that was similar to the first. She noted that the second instance involved another phone call from a university employed student fundraiser. She details her frustration with the university as it appeared they had not altered their strategy or approach. Avery mentioned:

After graduating I received another phone call from a female with the same spiel about “we’re calling to congratulate recent graduates.” She again asked if I had a job and immediately after I told her I had one she asked for a donation. I asked her if she could email more information and she told me no, she wasn’t able to do that until I committed to a donation of \$25 for six months. And then I asked if I could call her back and she didn’t have a number I could reach her at, it’s outgoing calls only. At this

point I am getting really irritated. So then I tell her that I have student loans I want to pay down first and then I would be more than happy to donate to the institution that gave me my degree. And then she told me “well it’s ok you can defer your donation until February.”...After those two phone calls it was like they couldn’t take no for an answer. I just felt it was really tacky how they were more or less harassing me for a donation...And now, I don’t even want to answer my phone because I know they are going to bug me about donating.

While citing a slightly similar negative out-of-class experience that again involved her alma mater’s attempt to solicit donations, Sydney mentioned:

When I received an email informing me that they are rebuilding this multimillion dollar sports stadium I felt less willing to donate. That definitely affected my future willingness to donate because it showed to me where some of the university’s priorities were. I never received any other emails saying “we’re developing out the psych building or we’re investing in these humanitarian efforts” or anything like that. It was just more focused on the sports aspects. So that definitely affected my willingness to contribute because that’s the only example that I have of what alumni money is potentially being used for.

Aiden's negative out-of-class experiences differed from the two previous ones provided. His negative experience involved interactions with the academic counselors that were assigned to him. Aiden stated:

My advisors at the time were absolutely horrendous. It was six weeks out to make an appointment with them. If I sent an email it might take two to three weeks to have it replied to. My advisors were terrible. I think they were overwhelmed. There was one of them for multi-thousands of students. At the time it was brutal. They didn't do anything for me.

After relaying his experience, Aiden later noted that he felt as one of the first students to enroll in the online bachelor's degree program he felt that the university was probably still trying to work out the kinks. He also mentioned that while he was very frustrated and upset about the experience, he did hold any ill will towards his alma mater. He later stated:

I didn't look down on the university because of my negative experiences. I knew that they were overwhelmed and were trying to fix it, and I'm generally the type, I would say, to give the benefit of the doubt. So it didn't really sour my relationship with the university. It was just that my personal experience wasn't as good as it could have been.



### **Additional Factors**

This section contains three categories that emerged from the participant data which relate to the additional factors that did impact, or could impact, the participant's willingness to donate. The first category is titled "student treatment" and reveals how many of the participants felt regarding their treatment as an online student compared to traditional students. The next category is termed "negative stigma regarding online education" and relates to the overwhelming unfavorable impression that accompanies online degree programs and their students. The final category in this section is designated as "factors that would lead to an increased willingness to donate" and reveals the various initiatives, or changes, that would be necessary in order to positively impact participants to donate to their alma mater.

#### **Student Treatment**

Seven of the twelve participants felt as though they were treated similarly to traditional students at their alma mater. In general, these participants felt that their alma mater made efforts to ensure that online students were treated in the same manner as their traditional students. These efforts included offering online courses and curriculum that was no different from traditional offerings, assigning professors to teach both traditional and online classes, and sending informational literature, and fundraising appeals, reminding online students that they were graduates just like all other alumni. Evidence of this is provided in one of Mary's responses. Noting the similarities between online courses and traditional course offerings, Mary recalled, "instructors would even

point out that their assignments and instructions are the same ones they are giving their traditional classes.”

Recalling his experiences, and the perceptions he felt as a graduate of an online bachelor’s degree program, Craig noted:

I feel a part of things because the university was constantly trying to include us online students in what was going on with the university. When I would log into the student portal there was information on the games, and updates on athletics and updates on all kinds of other things taking place on campus.

When asked if he could recall events that were tailored specifically for online bachelor’s degree students Craig also mentioned:

I can’t remember any activities or events that were specific for online students. But I have to admit I don’t really take issue with that. One of the main draws I had when I went to my alma mater is that they didn’t draw a line of distinction between me as an online student and traditional students. My degree doesn’t say I have an online bachelor’s degree. It just says bachelor’s degree and that was largely appealing to me. They weren’t trying to keep me separate but equal. So the fact that they don’t make it specific to online students comforts me. I’m just another university student. They didn’t treat me as though I was any different from their traditional students.

Citing the email communications he received from his alma mater, regarding campus updates, university athletic events, and general alumni association information, Joel noted that he appreciated how the university made an effort to make him feel like he was a part of the university's alumni. Joel said:

I liked the way the university made a very strong effort to make online students not feel like they were something special, but that they were just as important as traditional students and the degree you earned carried the same weight. I remember I got an email, several emails actually, that said “make no mistake as an online student you are a [university mascot] and you are a part of us.” The university did a good job at making you feel a part of everything.

### **Negative Stigma Regarding Online Education**

Seven of the twelve participants mentioned that they personally felt online degree programs were associated with a negative stigma. Many of the participants believed the predominate negative perceptions that abound involve easy admittance into online degree programs, online classes lack solid curriculum, online classes offer low educational rigor, and online degree programs produced graduates who were ill prepared to compete in private and public sector jobs. The participants believed these perceptions were held by students, employers and the general public. Several commented that they wished a marketing campaign would be developed to help educate the public with regards to the level of academic rigor and intensity in online degree programs, as well as

their similarities in curriculum to traditional degree programs. While seven of the twelve participants made specific comments that fell into this category several of the remaining participants made superficial mentions and chose not elaborate on the issue.

During his interview, Craig went into detail about his perception of the online bachelor's degree that he earned and how his alma mater added a level of credibility to it. Craig stated:

I knew that I didn't want to go to a for-profit college. I wanted to go somewhere that was a state university that would offer me a more traditional education. When I say I went to my alma mater it wouldn't cause people to raise an eyebrow and wonder if that is real. Whereas if I say I went to the University of Phoenix, which is still real and still provides a degree, people go "oh you're that kind of student." Like somehow my degree is less valuable. There is a stigma that goes along with getting your degree online that I don't particularly agree with and also don't like, and I didn't want it to affect me as I moved through my career in the professional world.

Noting his frustration regarding the way he is perceived by others, Craig also mentioned:

Whether other grads consider me to be an alumnus, it doesn't really matter. My wife laughs at me because I feel I'm an alumnus even though I didn't have the same traditional experience she did. There are probably

traditional alumni that don't consider me an alumnus because I attended online but it really doesn't matter.

Kenneth shared sentiments similar to Craig and revealed his frustration with those who don't fully understand all the time and effort required to earn an online bachelor's degree. He mentioned, "You don't just sign up and then they give you a degree. This is where a lot of the misconceptions that people have come from." Speaking to how he is perceived by others, and why he doesn't attend many alumni events, Kenneth also said, "Because even now if you go to an alumni event you may feel a little bit of a stigma. The majority of those people who are attending those alumni events attended on campus, as opposed to online."

Several participants, such as Paul, Avery and Mary, brought up the University of Phoenix during their interviews. Many felt that the University of Phoenix discredits other reputable online bachelor's degree programs, such as the one they earned from their alma mater. Paul noted his experience when trying to decide where to embark upon a degree:

I was told to not go with the for-profit universities, like the University of Phoenix and all that. Which I have to admit because of their very aggressive advertising I really thought they were the leaders in the market. So I kind of felt, I'll go to the University of Phoenix, and I was strongly advised to stay away from those because later on when I'll want

to go to graduate school, or look for work or whatever, it would not look good on my resume.

Avery made similar comments and mentioned that she had heard repeatedly that a degree from the University of Phoenix would not help her after graduation. She stated, “Looking at colleges, one of my friends went to the University of Phoenix. I had heard from several employers that anyone with a degree from the University of Phoenix gets resumes placed on the bottom of the stack of resumes.” In her response, Mary noted that she had to be convinced that an online degree from her alma mater would be viewed favorably by employers. She said:

I associated all online degrees like the University of Phoenix. I considered all online degrees, in my ignorance, as almost a buy-a-degree. And I looked to see what classes from my associate’s degree would transfer. So I spoke with a counselor and they assured me that it was the same curriculum [as traditional students at her alma mater] and that my degree from my university would not say “online.” I really had to be convinced that it was on par with a traditional degree.

### **Factors that Could Lead to an Increased Willingness to Donate and/or Associate**

Eleven of the twelve participants offered feedback that necessitated the formation of a category that showcased the factors that would lead to an increased willingness to donate and/or associate with their alma mater. The factors that the participants revealed were broad and wide ranging, however a few were repeated by more than one

participant. One of these factors included the high cost of online tuition. Recalling his experience trying to afford to attend his alma mater Ethan noted the high costs and the impact it has on the online graduate's willingness to donate. He said, "I think the tuition and additional fees that online students have to pay might be part of their reluctance to donate." While Ethan was the only participant to link a negative impact on the willingness to donate to the high cost of online tuition, several other participants did state their dissatisfaction with high online tuition costs. At the case institution, from which all twelve participants graduated with an online bachelor's degree, additional "convenience and technology" fees are required for those who wish to enroll in an online bachelor's degree program. These fees are in addition to those that are paid by traditional students. Assessing additional fees for online classes and online degree programs is a practice that takes place at many universities across the country. Hence, reducing these fees, or removing them altogether, could lead to increases in alumni willingness to donate and alumni association with their alma mater.

The other factor that detracted from their willingness to donate and their level of association with their alma mater, and which was mentioned often by participants, was the lack of opportunities to meet professors and classmates in a non-instructional setting. While it might appear counterintuitive, understanding that a hallmark of online education often involves distance from the actual campus, it did not detract from the desire that several participants had to meet their professors and classmates. Paul mentioned:

I would have really liked to have had the opportunities to have met my professors and some of my classmates. If there had been some sort of social event that I could meet my professors and classmates in person I would have loved that.

Craig mentioned similar opinions when he said, “There’s a certain amount of networking that you get being an on-campus student that is missing from the online programs. I think there is more that needs to be done in terms of networking for online students.”

When asked what would increase his association with his alma mater, and perhaps increase his willingness to donate as well, Kenneth said, “I guess maybe if I was doing more things with other alumni. Maybe even more specific to the way I finished, which was online. If there were more online students in the area and we had the chance to meet. I think it would make me feel more apt to donate if I felt more a part of a group.” Craig offered similar comments when he said, “Creating opportunities for online students to meet and mingle with other alumni in my area and hopefully be treated as an equal, as a member, as an alumnus.”

While some of the participants mentioned issues such as online tuition, and a lack of opportunities to meet their professors and classmates, a few mentioned their desire to receive information that was more specific. A couple of participants wanted to receive updates from campus and student and alumni success stories that stemmed from their academic degree program, as opposed to general university and alumni information. An example of this resides in Wini’s response when she mentioned, “In



order for me to become more closely associated with the university I would need maybe a short monthly email newsletter that has topics that I selected as interests. So something more person specific, not generic.”

Similar statements regarding more targeted information were made by Lindsey. During her interview she mentioned:

But I can tell you right now my alma mater is not targeting people like me. In order for me to become more closely associated with my university, and perhaps donate, I would like to know more of what is going on at the university other than football and basketball.

Sydney added another element to ideas that both Wini and Lindsey made. In addition to more specific information, Sydney declared that her willingness to donate relied heavily on the clarity of the message being delivered to her. She said:

The biggest thing that dictates my willingness is what the donated money is going to and the clearness with which that mission is delivered...I’m always very interested to see where that money is going and I feel like it’s not always delivered. I feel like I would need to be approached with more specific projects that then I would feel interested in donating in, rather than just a general collection fund. So, getting to have more of a say as to where my money goes would help me gain a closer association with the university and increase my willingness to donate...expanding the online

program in general and continuing to do anything that I can to help validate that as an equal educational opportunity.

### **Conclusion**

Within this chapter, I focused on the data collected from participants, its analysis, and the various findings from the research conducted. As is evident, the two rounds of interviews provided a wealth of information on a broad range of topics that dealt with the participants willingness to donate to their alma mater, their association with their alma mater, the experiences they had within the virtual classroom, as well as outside it, and the additional factors that impacted their willingness to donate and/or their association with their alma mater. The next chapter will include a discussion of the themes that developed from this data, an analysis of their meanings and a conversation regarding the implications for future research.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

*“In times of change learners inherit the earth; while the learned find themselves  
beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.” Eric Hoffer*

#### **Overview of the Study**

This chapter presents the final installment of this examination of online bachelor’s degree graduates and their willingness to donate money to their alma mater. The collected data was organized and analyzed using Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory as a guiding theoretical framework. In this chapter I present three themes that emerged from the participant data and explore their individual meanings, illustrate how they overlap and discuss their implications for future research.

During the creation of this study, there was a notable absence of research focusing on graduates of online bachelor’s degree programs and their willingness to make charitable contributions to their alma mater. This absence, therefore, makes it difficult to develop accurate assumptions about alumni of online programs and their willingness to offer financial support to their universities, as well as the motivations behind such philanthropic inclinations. Four aspects related to this problem are clear: (1) online education is the fastest growing segment of higher education in the United States (Hsu, 2008); (2) roughly two-thirds of the colleges and universities in this nation are offering online courses and online degree programs (Weiss, 2011); (3) higher education

in most states has experienced steady declines in state funding (Bhatt, Rork & Walker, 2011); and (4) alumni typically represent the best pool of potential donors to colleges and universities in the United States (Black, Dawson & Ferdig, 2006).

Given the steady decline in state funding for higher education nationwide and the enormous growth in online education at institutions of higher learning across the country, colleges and universities would be prudent to develop tactics to capture the hearts and minds of their online bachelor's degree alumni and employ strategies that create a culture of giving. With this in mind, three questions served as guiding principles for this research:

- 1) To what extent are graduates of public, non-profit online bachelor's degree programs willing to donate money to their college or university?
- 2) How do their virtual classroom or instructional experiences as students enrolled in online bachelor's degrees impact their willingness to donate money to their college or university?
- 3) Additionally, how do their non-instructional experiences inside and outside the virtual classroom impact their willingness to donate money to their college or university?

The research for this dissertation utilized a case-study design and relied on the theoretical framework of social identity theory. Social identity theory was developed by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner and has been utilized in numerous studies, as it provides a well-established context for understanding individual and group dynamics. Social identity theory was the most applicable lens with which to view online

bachelor's degree alumni, as it provides insight into the unique dynamics that exist between an individual and an organization, as well as the impact these interactions have on the development of an individual's self-image, and ultimately, on their behavior. Hence, social identity theory provides the most appropriate backdrop for studying online bachelor's degree graduates and gauge their willingness to donate to their alma mater.

This study focused on graduates of online bachelor's degree programs from the same university, as opposed to multiple universities. Specifically, this study utilized a single unit case-study research design. The university from which online bachelor's degree graduates were chosen is a national, non-profit, space-grant institution and public metropolitan research university comprising of one main campus and several satellite campuses throughout a state located in the southwestern United States. The population of this study included twelve participants who were purposively sampled based on their graduation with an online bachelor's degree from the same public four-year university. The method of online course delivery was sought in order to examine a population of graduates whose college experience differed from the norm in that few, if any, courses were taken on campus in a traditional classroom setting.

### **Summary of Results**

As outlined in previous chapters, the focus of this study was to examine online bachelor's degree graduates and gauge their willingness to donate money to their alma mater. In doing so, I wanted to view these unique alumni through the lens of social identity theory and discover what light this theory can shed on their decisions to donate money to their alma mater. An additional aim of this study was to ascertain if online

bachelor's degree graduates shared the same qualities and characteristics of alumni of traditional degree programs concerning their donating behavior to their alma mater.

The research questions that guided this study sought to identify information from two separate, yet intertwined, areas. The first research question was designed to identify the willingness of online bachelor's degree graduates to donate money to their alma mater. The second and third questions were crafted to determine the impact that instructional and non-instructional experiences had on their willingness to donate. Through the analysis of the participant data, several linkages between characteristics of the theoretical framework of social identity theory and the findings of this study have become apparent.

The results of this study were intriguing and will shed light on the understudied population of online bachelor's degree graduates, especially with regards to their willingness to donate to their alma mater. Through analyzing the data, and using the research questions and theoretical framework as a guide, I identified several commonalities among the participant's comments. The commonalities were not specific to one particular response, but rather permeated throughout the responses of the numerous questions asked of the participants. Viewed collectively, these commonalities comprised the findings and results of this study. After a thorough analysis of the participant data, three notable themes began to develop: (1) appreciation, obligation and university reputation influence a willingness to donate, (2) lack of unique experiences impacts association and donations, and (3) negative perceptions of for-profit universities

impact alumni association with alma mater. In the paragraphs that follow these themes will be introduced, explored and explained.

### **Themes**

Table 3 provides a visual sequence concerning the thematic development that took place in this study. The first column titled “Themes” lists each of the specific themes that emerged from this study, while the second column titled “Categories” details the individual categories that morphed into the development of each theme.

*Table 3 Themes and Categories*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Categories</b>
Appreciation, Obligation and University Reputation Influence a Willingness to Donations	Willingness to Donate (9/12) Unwilling to Donate (3/12) Philanthropic Inclinations (6/12) Associate/Identify with their Alma Mater (8/12) Do Not Associate/Identify with their Alma Mater (4/12) Impressions of their Alma Mater before Enrolling (10/12) University Contact (12/12)
Lack of Unique Experiences Impacts Association and Donations	Positive Instructional Experiences (10/12) Negative Instructional Experiences (3/12) Maintaining Contact with Students (12/12) Positive Non-Instructional Experiences (11/12) Negative Non-Instructional Experiences (3/12)
Negative Perceptions of For-Profit Universities Impact their Association with Alma Mater	Student Treatment (7/12) Negative Stigma Regarding Online Education (7/12) Factors that Could Lead to an Increased Willingness to Donate and/or Associate (11/12)



## **Appreciation, Obligation and University Reputation Influence a Willingness to Donate**

The principal intent of this study was to determine if a willingness to donate to their alma mater existed among graduates of online bachelor's degrees. As the participant responses in Chapter IV revealed, a willingness to donate to their alma mater does exist. In order to glean valuable insights from the participant data, it becomes necessary to ascertain the impetus behind their stated willingness. The application of social identity theory provided an ideal theoretical framework from which to view and analyze this data. Furthermore, social identity theory assisted in pinpointing the factors that impact participants' willingness and helped garner a greater understanding of their willingness altogether.

Social identity theory proposes that the groups to which individuals belong serve as key sources of pride and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and that the links and associations individuals have with these social groups aid in the development of their social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). In addition, Tajfel (1974) contended that one's self-image consists of an individual and social component. He defines these components as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1974, p. 69). Within this context the emotional attachment that exists between the online bachelor's degree graduate and their alma mater deserves examination. The results of this study reveal that an overwhelming majority, nine of the twelve participants, proclaimed they were willing to donate to their

alma mater. Further analysis of the participant data uncovered a combination of key factors linked to the emotional attachment to which Tajfel refers and appear to serve as the impetus behind participants' willingness to donate. In general terms, these factors include emotional attachments such as appreciation, obligation and the university's reputation.

### **Appreciation**

Among the participants who felt a willingness to donate to their alma mater were several who acknowledged a deep sense of appreciation towards their university. This finding is consistent with the main principles of social identity theory. Social identity theory suggests that the groups to which individuals belong serve as key sources of pride and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Several participants noted that their appreciation of their alma mater resulted from a variety of experiences they had while they were students. Kenneth mentioned that his appreciation stemmed from being accepted to his alma mater with what he believed was a poor academic history. He stated, "I think it was overall because I was able to get into a program that accepted me from the University of Phoenix, and even before that, my credits were pretty bad. I was appreciative of that." Describing his appreciation towards his alma mater for the effort made in developing its online programs, Craig noted, "It felt right, and the curriculum and programs felt right. Their presentation seemed far more meaningful, and it was better suited to what I wanted to accomplish academically." Detailing her appreciation, Wini commented on the level of convenience the university incorporated into her

academic program. She stated that “the university just made it convenient where I could do school work whenever my child was sleeping and around my work schedule.”

In another interview, Avery offered information that provided a more direct link between her emotional attachment and the impact it had on her willingness to donate. Avery claimed that her appreciation emanated from her loyalty to the university where she received her online bachelor’s degree, as well as from the fact that her alma mater did not distinguish between a traditional bachelor’s degree and an online bachelor’s degree. More specifically, she noted that her alma mater did not include the term “online” anywhere on her actual degree. She added, “once I received my degree, no one would know that it was completed online....So if I’m gonna donate money, yeah I want it to be towards my school who gave me my education.”

Avery’s statements illustrate the clear link between the emotional attachment she felt with her alma mater and the impact it had in forming a willingness to donate to it. The appreciation felt by these participants stems largely from actions taken by their alma mater. These actions included granting Kenneth admission with poor grades, developing a program for Wini that offered students the flexibility to earn a bachelor’s degree on her terms and granting a degree to Avery that did not include the term “online” and aided in the development of their appreciation. Consequently, these actions made many of the participants feel valued, and feeling valued elevated their self-esteem. Therefore, their appreciation reveals some of the emotional attachment they maintain to their alma mater, as well as an explanation as to why the emotional attachment exists.

## **Obligation**

Another emotional attachment that played a pivotal role in the formation of a willingness to donate to their alma mater resided in a sense of obligation. In their research concerning the motivations behind giving, Van Slyke and Brooks uncovered several triggers that appear to impact donors' willingness to donate to their alma mater, one of which was a sense of duty (2005). Several participants noted that they felt an obligation to donate to their alma mater because of what they perceived the university did for them as students and individuals. Craig described the obligation he believed he had to the university, as well as future online students. He stated, "I think that participating by donating money and helping to propagate that becomes part of my social and academic responsibility." He later added:

I recognize the contribution that the university has made to me as an individual and I understand that by getting involved and taking up the responsibility of giving money back to the university, even though I paid for my degree, I'm helping someone else, and I'm helping the next generation of students come up and have the same opportunities that I did, if not more.

Detailing his sense of obligation to his alma mater, Kenneth noted that he felt it was his duty to give back to the university that gave so much to him. Kenneth stated, "I wouldn't mind giving back to the school that gave to me." Sydney's comments provide another example of the deep-rooted sense of obligation she felt towards her alma mater

and how it has created a willingness within her to donate. Sydney said, “I feel that I’m connected through the online program in general. I feel the need to support that mode of education since I’m a byproduct of that.” Sydney’s sense of obligation differs from Craig’s because it is linked to the academic program she graduated from, rather than the overall university. However, regardless of its object, the obligation she feels has created a willingness to donate to her alma mater.

The sense of duty and obligation that was felt by several of the participants in this study is consistent with the core principles of social identity theory. Expanding on the emotional attachment that Tajfel noted in the initial development of social identity theory, Boezman and Ellemers suggested that individuals consider themselves psychologically linked to the social groups of which they are members (Tajfel, 1974; Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007). Similar psychological links and emotional attachments have been identified in prior research that focused on patterns of giving among young graduates of traditional college degree programs (Monks, 2003). Monks’ research uncovered an increased willingness to donate among graduates who received need based grants and scholarships from their alma mater (Monks, 2003). Within the context of the online bachelor’s degree graduates in this study, it appears that they form psychological links and emotional attachments similar to those of students who graduate with traditional degrees, such as a sense of obligation, and these attachments serve as substantial influencers in the development of a willingness to donate to their alma mater.

## **University Reputation**

Among the participants who felt a willingness to donate to their alma mater, were several who acknowledged the reputation of their university as a contributing factor. As Tajfel and Turner noted, one of the principal tenets of social identity theory stipulates that the groups to which individuals belong serve as key sources of pride and self-esteem (1979). Based on many of the participants' responses, the perceived reputation of quality, prestige and notoriety of their alma mater fostered an emotional attachment that served as a source of pride and boosted their self-esteem. Consequently, these emotional attachments influenced their willingness to donate.

Several participants noted the positive perception they had of their alma mater before being accepted, while they were students, and even as alumni. Mary reflected on her feelings of pride because of the solid reputation her alma mater enjoyed. She stated:

It's just a school that carries a great name....It's the first time I've ever wanted to have a bumper sticker or a sweatshirt with a name on it. This is the first organization that I wouldn't mind being identified with....It's always just had a good reputation in my mind.

During her response, Sydney revealed her esteem for her alma mater regarding its notoriety nationwide. She mentioned:

Just the size of the university, because it's so large, and it's so well known around the country. I feel also more quick to say 'yeah, I'm an

alumnus,' versus saying I'm an alumnus of my other school just because it's not as well known. So my university is an easier identifier as well.

Sharing similar sentiments, Lindsey noted that one of her requirements in selecting a university was that it maintained a positive reputation. She stated, "I wanted a school with a good reputation, and that is why I chose my alma mater." Ethan shared comparable feelings when he said, "Through my own research, I knew that my alma mater was a recognized online school. I had researched in the past other universities but I had not heard of one as good as my university."

The emotional attachments formed among the participants in this study, and as a result of their alma mater's reputation, are consistent with previous research that explored alumni donor motivations. In his research on donor motivations, Monks found that the alumni's emotional attachments to, or feelings about, the current state of their alma mater serve as a clear motivation for giving (Monks, 2003). Considering the applied concepts of social identity theory, it becomes more apparent how the emotional attachment to university reputation can serve as an influence on participants' willingness to donate to their alma mater. Keeping in mind that social identity theory stipulates that the individual and the social group share attributes (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007), it is evident that a positive perception of the reputation of the university will manifest itself in the elevated self-confidence of the participants.

As the data reveals, a willingness to donate does exist among the participants. However, as previous information concerning the nuances of social identity theory has shown, there is more to this data than the participants' willingness to donate. There are

additional factors to consider outside of the realization that a willingness to donate exists, such as the emotional attachments that social identity theory posits. The identified components such as appreciation, obligation and the university's reputation serve as contributing factors in the development of a willingness to donate among the participants in this study. Given this information, the first research question asked in this study can be answered in the affirmative. However, the answer to this research question is not nearly as important as the factors that reside in the emotional attachments online bachelor's degree alumni hold for their alma mater.

As the findings of this study reveal, willingness is not always a good predictor of future donations, as nine of twelve participants noted they were willing to donate, yet only three actually made donations. Therefore, the actual mechanics of making a donation, as well as the philanthropic intent of the donor, are additional points to ponder. This is not to say that a willingness to donate is not important or should be disregarded. Rather, a willingness to donate is a critical antecedent to the act of making a donation. Given my experience as a fundraiser in higher education, I cannot imagine a donation being made by an individual who was not willing. Hence, the presence of willingness is the critical impetus within the overall process of making donations (Tom & Elmer, 1994). My contention is that while existence of willingness to donate is important, it does not always translate to actual donations. Noting the importance of a willingness to give, Tom and Elmer wrote of "the importance of recognizing the alumni sentiment of 'willingness to give' and the need to monitor or track this sentiment over time" (1994). Citing the need for additional studies on the willingness of alumni to give, McDearmon



and Shirley noted, “more research is needed in order to determine what areas of the college experience translate into higher expressed satisfaction and more willingness for the alumni to donate” (2009, p. 93).

### **Lack of Unique Experiences Impacts Association and Donations**

While the primary intent of this study was to determine if a willingness to donate to their alma mater existed among graduates of an online bachelor’s degree, a secondary aim was to ascertain what role association would play between the online bachelor’s degree graduates and their alma mater, and how association might impact their willingness to donate money. Given that feelings of association with an organization are created through experiences, it was necessary to include questions in the interviews that would reveal experiences of both an instructional and non-instructional nature.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) attempts to explain the dynamics of organizational association and the impact it has on the development of an individual’s social identity. Conversely, the theory also ventures to explain the impact social identification has on individuals and the organizations with which they associate. In their introduction and description of social identity theory, Tajfel and Turner do not specifically mention the nuanced relationship between a university and an alumnus. However, the principles of the theory are clearly applicable to such a relationship. As the participant data has shown, the majority of participants, eight of the twelve included in this study, felt they had an association with their alma mater. Additionally, of the twelve participants eight felt as though they were a part of the alumni, or “in-group,” of their alma mater. With this newly uncovered participant data, additional linkages emerge

between the participants association with their alma mater and the principles of the theoretical framework of this study.

Comments made by Joel were representative of those made by several other participants. In his response, Joel mentioned:

Other than watching football on television and rooting for the university, and wanting to be a part of that forever, I wouldn't say there was anything greater than just being associated with the university in general. That excites and intrigues me and I like being a part of the university because of that.

Paul's association with his alma mater differed from Joel's, in that it didn't focus on, or relate to, the athletic components of the university, but rather the academic elements and the degree that he earned. He stated:

It's where I got my bachelor's degree. I initially started in 2001 and dropped out, and eventually came back and got two bachelor's degrees in short order when I came back to do it online. So I feel connected because I did not do so well at my other attempts at other colleges. So I feel connected in that sense. I am also currently enrolled in a master's program here, so I kind of feel part of it in that sense as well.

Other participants provided substantial explanations surrounding the deep seated association and affiliation they maintain with their alma mater. During her response, Mary mentioned:

I've just thought about it off and on, and it's really probably the only thing I truly identify myself with outside my kids....This is the first organization that I wouldn't mind being identified with.

Social identity theory stipulates that individuals will behave similarly to the group of which they are members, and members of an in-group are more likely to participate in group culture and group behavior (Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Stets & Burke, 2000). The characteristics that these researchers describe are indicative of those that often lead to charitable giving among the population of alumni who are members of the "in-group." With only three of the twelve participants in this study claiming to be current donors to their alma mater, there appears to be a lack of participation in making donations. This draws attention to a disparity that exists between the participants' charitable giving to their alma mater and the principle of social identity theory, which Ethier and Deaux stated. We know from the previous theme that a willingness to donate to their alma mater does exist among the majority of the participants. Therefore, the willingness needed to make a donation is not the factor that prevents the participants from doing so.

Upon further analysis, another key factor regarding the lack of donations can be ruled out as the cause of this disparity. In order for willingness to convert into a

donation, some form of solicitation, or request, must occur to move from feelings of willingness to the act of giving. Van Slyke and Brooks echoed this sentiment in their research on donor motivations, identifying the act of being asked as a motivational trigger (2005). The apparent lack of charitable contributions to their alma mater is not the result of the university failing to solicit them from this group adequately, as all of the participants in this study were able to recall, in some cases with great detail, the number of times the university had asked them for money.

The area that comes closest to explaining the disparity between the participant's lack of charitable giving and the principles of social identity theory appear to reside in the participants' association with their alma mater. In fact, numerous studies have found that the degree of association does impact alumni willingness to donate (Koole, 1981; Tom & Elmer, 1994; Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Baade & Sundberg, 1996; Gaier, 2003; Monks, 2003; Conner, 2005; Sun, 2005; Tsao & Coll, 2005; Weerts & Ronca, 2007; Wastyn, 2009). The depth of alumni association and connection appears to be a critical component as it relates to future giving (Hogg, 2006). Furthermore, while it might seem counter intuitive, social identity theory also suggests that association with a social group can occur without interaction (Scott, 2007).

Additional research has indicated that no face-to-face contact between members is required for strong associations and connections to exist between the group and its members (Tajfel et al, 1971). Therefore, their lack of association cannot necessarily be blamed on geographic distance from the university. Decades of research, much of which has been included in this study, have proven that the strength of the association between

alumni and their alma mater plays a pivotal role in their future giving (Koole, 1981; Tom & Elmer, 1994; Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Baade & Sundberg, 1996; Clotfelter, 2003; Monks, 2003; Conner, 2005; Gaier, 2005; Sun, 2005; Tsao & Coll, 2005; Weerts & Ronca, 2007; James III, 2008; Wastyn, 2009). Given what is known about social identity theory and its core principles, we must assume that within the development of a strong association between the online bachelor's degree student and his or her alma mater, a critical component is missing.

The participants' association with their alma mater, and their willingness to donate to it, are among the most interesting findings of this study. While most of the participants responded that they did associate themselves with the institution from which they received their online bachelor's degree, their association lacked the strength necessary to develop into actual donations. This, therefore, leads me to believe that the participants' association with their alma mater appeared strong, but was not strong enough for them to engage in the acts, such as donating, that those with a more robust association with their alma mater possess. These findings appear to be consistent with those from recent research concerning online alumni (Hurst, 2008; Distance Education Report, 2009). In his research regarding charitable giving among online alumni, Hurst stated that "with non-traditional alumni, the desire to give is there; universities just need to find ways to channel the interest" (Hurst, 2008; Distance Education Report, 2009, p. 7).

Based on a thorough examination of the participant data, it would appear that the missing components are unique experiences. I contend that the online environment is

unable to create the unique experiences necessary to form a strong association with one's alma mater. As prior research has shown a strong association plays an important role in an individual's willingness to donate (Koole, 1981; Tom & Elmer, 1994; Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Baade & Sundberg, 1996; Clotfelter, 2003; Monks, 2003; Conner, 2005; Gaier, 2005; Sun, 2005; Tsao & Coll, 2005; Weerts & Ronca, 2007; James III, 2008; Wastyn, 2009). While numerous instances of positive instructional and non-instructional experiences exist in the participant data, there appears to be a considerable lack of unique experiences, such as those a traditional student might have, and that a traditional college experience might provide. Therefore, online bachelor's degree programs, and perhaps all online degree programs, need to identify ways to create an environment that is conducive to the formation of unique experiences. Until this happens, alumni may be satisfied with their student experience and their alma mater, but lack the necessary association and connection necessary to donate. If efforts to grow online bachelor's degrees are to continue, it will be necessary to incorporate strategies that promote the formation and existence of unique experiences for this burgeoning population of alumni.

One of the most basic tenets of social identity theory states that connections between an individual and an organization can lead to behavior that is beneficial and/or pro-social toward the organization (Tyler & Bladder, 2002; Tidwell, 2005). Therefore, in viewing this data through the lens of social identity theory, it becomes clear that strong, meaningful connections to their alma mater do not exist among these online bachelor's degree graduates. This group of participants represents a population that admits to having a willingness to donate to their alma mater, but their association lacks the

strength necessary to follow through with their stated intent. The notion of a weak association with their alma mater relies heavily on their actions as opposed to their words, considering the majority of the participants did not donate money to their alma mater. The lack of unique experiences had by the participants prohibited the formation of a strong association of the type from which donations would likely stem (Wastyn, 2009). In other words, the lack of triggers, such as unique experiences, failed to convert the participant's willingness to donate into actual donations (Van Slyke & Brooks, 2005).

Furthermore, it also appears that the weak association held by most of these participants affect other areas of alumni "in-group" behavior as well. For example, many of the participants also noted that they do not attend athletic or other university-sponsored events, do not make an effort to watch televised athletic events, and do not make a conscious effort to purchase university items or apparel. This is another example of behavior that is contrary to a strong association, as well as principles of social identity theory. In their research on social identity theory, Boezeman and Ellemers noted that individuals consider themselves psychologically linked to the social groups of which they are members (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007). Based on their donating behavior and their overall lack of support for their university, it is apparent that the participants of this study are not psychologically linked to their alma mater. This further solidifies the notion that these alumni lack the strong association necessary for the university to benefit from their expressed willingness to provide charitable contributions.

While discussing a number of related studies focusing on alumni donor motivations, and the resulting outcomes, McDearmon and Shirley (2009) noted that “These studies suggest that how and to what degree an individual student is engaged during their undergraduate years can affect their donation behaviors many years after graduation” (p. 85). If the feelings revealed in the responses provided by the participants in this study are shared by others, or may serve as an indication of other online graduate perceptions, then colleges and universities that offer online bachelor’s degree programs need to do more to engage their online students.

### **Negative Perceptions of For-Profit Universities Impact their Association with Alma Mater**

Woven throughout various portions of the participant data were opinions, comments and references aimed at for-profit universities, commonly referred to by the general public as “online universities.” Many of the participants believed the most predominant and prevalent perceptions concerning the online degrees that online universities confer, involve easy admittance, lack of a solid curriculum, low levels of educational rigor, and the notion that online degree programs produce graduates who are ill prepared for today’s public- and private-sector jobs (Adams, 2008a; Adams, 2008b; Thompson, 2009; Richardson et al, 2011). The participants felt that these perceptions were held by most students and employers, as well as by the general public. The University of Phoenix was the only online university that was mentioned by name among those participants who held negative opinions, and among this group, there were three participants who had previously attended the University of Phoenix.



The majority of the participants, including the three who had previously attended the University of Phoenix, held the opinion that institutions like the University of Phoenix damaged the credibility of online bachelor's degrees and online education in general. These sentiments correlate to a recent review of literature by Columbaro and Monaghan (2009), who noted in their findings a marked stigma regarding online degrees among hiring managers and the general public. Many of the participants commented on how they didn't want others to view their online degree in the same light as an online degree from the University of Phoenix. Most of the participants derided the prevailing misconceptions regarding online bachelor's degree programs, and placed much of the blame on for-profit colleges and universities and their failure to combat the frequent negative perceptions held by employers and the general public.

The negative sentiment held by most of the participants is consistent with the elements of social identity theory that deal with the divided world of in-groups and out-groups (McLeod, 2008). Social identity theory proposes that individuals strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity (Zeugner-Roth et al, 2015). Furthermore, this positive identity stems largely from favorable comparisons between the group to which they belong (in-group) and other groups (out-groups) to which they do not belong (Hogg, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). In this instance, online universities, particularly the University of Phoenix, served as a prominent out-group among the participants. Furthermore, the positive identity the participants enjoyed were directly attributable to two predominant influences. These influences included the fact that their online bachelor's degree was awarded from a traditional, non-profit, state university and that

their alma mater chose not to include the term “online” on their degree. These factors aided in the development of a favorable identity and served to impact their association with their alma mater positively.

After reviewing the participant data, I noticed the impact a negative perception of online universities had on the participants of this study. The impact manifested itself in an appreciation that bolstered their willingness to donate and spurred a closer association with their alma mater. This unique dynamic further solidified the applicability and appropriateness of social identity theory as the theoretical framework of this study. As McLeod posited, social identity theory assumes a divided world of in-groups and out-groups (2008). McLeod further defines the “in-group” as any group to which an individual belongs (2008), and the alumni of a university would certainly qualify as such. In the development of social identity theory, Tajfel noted the unique difference between in-groups and out-groups when he stated that favorable status only maintains an elevated status when compared to other groups (Tajfel, 1971). With respect to the participants of this study, the online bachelor’s degree graduates felt part of their own elevated “in-group” based largely on the fact that they received a bachelor’s degree from a highly respected, non-profit, traditional, four-year university. Alternatively, the “out-group” was differentiated from the “in-group” by the fact that they were graduates of a negatively perceived, for-profit online university.

In documenting their strong feelings against online universities, and the negative perceptions associated with them, several participants felt that the University of Phoenix discredits other reputable online bachelor’s degree programs, such as the one in which

they participated. Paul noted his experience when trying to decide where to embark upon a degree:

I was told to not go with the for-profit universities, like the University of Phoenix and all that....So I kind of felt, I'll go to the University of Phoenix, and I was strongly advised to stay away from those, because later on when I'll want to go to graduate school, or look for work or whatever, it would not look good on my resume.

Craig went into detail about his perception of the online bachelor's degree that he earned and how his alma mater added a higher level of credibility. He stated:

I knew that I didn't want to go to a for-profit college. I wanted to go somewhere that was a state university that would offer me a more traditional education. When I say I went to my alma mater, it wouldn't cause people to raise an eyebrow and wonder if that is real. Whereas if I say I went to the University of Phoenix, which is still real and still provides a degree, people go "oh you're that kind of student." Like somehow my degree is less valuable. There is a stigma that goes along with getting your degree online that I don't particularly agree with and also don't like, and I didn't want it to affect me as I moved through my career in the professional world.

Kenneth shared sentiments similar to Craig's and revealed his frustration with those who don't fully understand all the time and effort required to earn an online bachelor's degree. He said, "You don't just sign up and then they give you a degree. This is where a lot of the misconceptions that people have come from." Mary noted that she had to be convinced that an online degree from her alma mater would be viewed favorably by employers. She said, "I associated all online degrees like the University of Phoenix. I considered all online degrees, in my ignorance, as almost a buy-a-degree."

In addition to their gratitude for receiving a degree that did not include the term "online," the participants shared their appreciation to the university for granting them the same degree earned by traditional students. They noted the efforts made by their alma mater to create online bachelor's degree programs that were comparable to traditional bachelor's degrees. The similarities between the traditional and online programs included the same courses, with the same professors, as well as identical coursework assignments and expectations. These participants felt that the manner in which their alma mater treated them increased their willingness to donate and their association with the university. Detailing her feelings regarding the shared curriculum and courses offered in both online bachelor's degrees and traditional degrees at her alma mater, Mary stated:

So I spoke with a counselor and they assured me that it was the same curriculum [used for traditional students at her alma mater] and that my degree from my university would not say "online." I really had to be convinced that it was on par with a traditional degree.

Throughout the course of the two interviews held with each participant, I noticed a recurring sense of comparison between themselves and graduates of for-profit universities. The participants were adamant that they graduated from an academically sound and reputable online bachelor's degree program and did not desire to be viewed as a typical online degree graduate. Initially this comparison seemed odd, considering these participants had graduated with an online bachelor's degree program from a top-tier, accredited, non-profit, four-year university. While the participants refused to accept the identity others had given them as online students, they still felt the need to justify the online bachelor's degree they received. Regardless of how they were perceived, the participants' willingness to donate and their association with their alma mater stemmed from a combination of the negative perceptions they held towards online universities and the steps taken by their alma mater to offer an online degree comparable to its traditional degree offerings.

### **Significance of the Research**

This study was unique with regards to the group it studied, as well as the topics it explored. New research is often accompanied by new findings, and in that respect, the findings of this study offered new insights into the perceptions and behavior of online bachelor's degree graduates. While this study has uncovered a great deal of information concerning online graduates, the findings will not solve all the issues and challenges that surround online bachelor's degree graduates and their low levels of association and lack of charitable giving to their alma mater. However, by identifying the factors that impact their willingness to donate money to their alma mater and uncovering the influence of

their depth of association, colleges and universities now have additional information with which to make informed decisions regarding alterations and enhancements to their online bachelor's degree programs.

The findings of this study show that online bachelor's degree graduates portrayed associations and behaviors consistent with the principles of social identity theory. The only aspect of the findings that appears to deviate from social identity theory is the level of association. While social identity theory offers a wide range of principles that attempt to explain the nuances in the associations humans maintain with organizations, its reach does not adequately extend, or explain, the impact that the depth of organizational associations have on human behavior. From that standpoint, the findings of this study should motivate additional research into the area of associational depth and its impact. This new element could serve to strengthen social identity theory and make it a more robust theory for research.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

As the data in this study suggests, online bachelor's degree graduate participants generally had a willingness to donate to their alma mater and felt an association with their alma mater; however the association does not appear to be strong enough to lead to beneficial and/or pro-social behavior toward the organization (Tyler & Bladder, 2002; Tidwell, 2005). Therefore, additional measures should be developed and implemented to aid in the creation and maintenance of a more robust association between online bachelor's degree graduates and their alma mater. An ideal starting point would be some of the engaging ideas that participants of this study suggested.

The recommendations provided are a combination of suggestions offered by the participants themselves, initiatives being employed in online graduate degree programs at other universities, and my own ideas. While I believe their application, either individually or collectively, can impact online bachelor's degree graduates' willingness to donate and their association with their alma mater, I do not suggest they will completely reverse the current trends of low charitable giving among this group of alumni. Research has shown that no single factor likely persuades donors to make charitable contributions (Parsons & Wethington, 1996; Peltier et al, 2002; Cascione, 2003; Schervish, 2005; Van Slyke & Brooks, 2005). Rather, donations stem from a long process of retrospection between the donor and the charity (Parsons & Wethington, 1996; Peltier et al, 2002; Schervish, 2005).

### **Increase Opportunities for Engagement**

In recent years there has been considerable research and exploration focusing on the retention of college students pursuing online degrees (Angelino et al, 2007; Betts, 2008, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2009). As a result of this research, numerous strategies have been suggested and developed aimed at improving retention rates among online students by increasing student engagement. Centralizing efforts around initiatives that elevate engagement among online students appears to be one of the most consistently recommended conclusions (Angelino et al, 2007; Betts, 2008, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2009). Highlighting this finding, Angelino and her colleagues (2007) argued that if online students are to be engaged with the university, then online education must be more than simply translating traditional coursework into an online platform.

An example of an initiative whose overarching goal is to promote increased opportunities for engagement among online students is the Online Human Touch (OHT) initiative. The concept of Online Human Touch was developed and implemented at Drexel University in 2005 (Betts, 2008). OHT was created to accompany a new online master's degree of science in higher education and employed a holistic approach that attempted to balance instruction with elements of connection and engagement. The architects of OHT believed it was imperative that the instruction and programming of this master's degree should focus on several key areas: (1) actively engaging students, (2) incorporating work-integrated learning, (3) fostering and supporting community development, and (4) personally connecting students to Drexel University as future alumni (Betts, 2008).

The initiative was evaluated over the course of three years and yielded positive affects in student engagement (Betts, 2008). In addition, the community development portion of OHT was found to play an important role in creating substantial connections between the online students and the university (Hagan, 2013). Betts also noted that the OHT concept was developed in ways that could be fully integrated into any online degree program and tailored to specific colleges and universities (2008). The concept of OHT relies heavily upon Tinto's theory of student departure (1975, 1993). Tinto's theory suggests the more that students are engaged in the university community, the less likely they are to depart (1975). While Tinto's theory dealt mainly with retention, linkages do extend to the associations alumni develop with their alma mater. In other words, if students depart the university because of limited engagement, they will likely



never become alumni or donors to the university. Moving forward, the implementation of programs like OHT could help foster strong connections and associations between the online student and their alma mater.

### **Promote Relationship Building with Professors and Classmates**

While it might appear counterintuitive, many of the participants in this study mentioned their desire to have opportunities to visit with their professors and classmates in a non-instructional setting. Many felt as though their experience was diminished, and the outcomes of their degree negatively impacted, by this lack of interaction. Therefore, the case institution should create opportunities for online students to mix and mingle with their professors and classmates in an out-of-class, or non-instructional setting. A tactic that could be employed would be the implementation of an abbreviated residency requirement.

The online master of business administration degree at Pennsylvania State University requires two one-week residency experiences. These residency experiences “are designed to foster valuable interactions with faculty, business leaders, and other students” (Penn State Online, 2015). “Among the potential benefits of online MBA residencies is the chance to build a professional network” (Haynie, 2015, pg. 1). Residency programs have proven to be a valuable resource to students while enrolled in their online bachelor’s degree program. This type of program not only provides them with the opportunity to get to know their professors and classmates in a non-instructional setting, but also provides them the opportunity to take part in some of the unique

experiences known to play an important role in creating a deep and meaningful association with the alma mater.

### **Create Events Tailored to Online Students and Online Alumni**

The participant responses make it evident that online bachelor's degree graduates desire events tailored to them specifically. Colleges and universities that offer online bachelor's degree programs should, therefore, create events and/or initiatives, that are geared specifically towards online bachelor's degree students and graduates. One option is to find ways to increase the participation of online bachelor's degree students at university graduation ceremonies. Noting Kenneth's comments:

Going to the graduation ceremony helped me and made me feel a little bit more like I was part of the community there, as opposed to an outsider looking in. So that was a fun experience for me. Again, feeling like I was a part of things and participating as part of the community.

At least one university has created a way for more of its students, especially its online students, to participate in its commencement ceremonies. Southern New Hampshire University offers live feeds of their graduation ceremonies so that online graduates that live at a distance can participate in the ceremony and celebrate their achievement with friends and family. This is a relatively inexpensive way to create a unique experience for the online bachelor's degree graduate. Other event options that could be tailored to online students include those that resemble "After 5" or "Happy Hour" events that are commonly held by university alumni associations. These events

could be held in metropolitan areas where there are large concentrations of enrolled online students and target this population exclusively for attendance. The online students would then have the opportunity to fellowship with one another, and professors of online courses could be encouraged to attend. While there would likely be online students who would not be able to attend and participate because of their location, the knowledge of such events could increase the likelihood of feeling valued by their alma mater.

Similar types of events could also be held exclusively for online bachelor's degree graduates as well. Events targeting online bachelor's degree graduates would provide an ideal setting for networking opportunities, as well as help foster relationships among local groups of online alumni. In addition, targeting online alumni exclusively for this type of event would lessen the likelihood of in-groups and out-groups forming between attending traditional and online alumni. Any and all measures should be taken to avoid the formation of the in-groups and out-groups that social identity theory describes. This is especially true given that the overall goal is to build connections and associations between alumni and their alma mater.

### **Expanded Use of Academic Counselors**

Virtually all of the participants made mention of positive experiences and interactions with the academic counselors their alma mater assigned to them. Many of the participants felt the counselors played an important role in keeping them on track with their degree, as well as serving as a source of accountability and encouragement. In several instances, participants added that the academic counselors drew them closer to the university and made them feel more a part of the university. Comments relating to

the implementation of academic counselors for online bachelor's degree students were the most recurring statements made by the participants, and also served as the most positive out-of-class experience between the participants and their alma mater. The expansion of the use of academic counselors who interact with online bachelor's degree students should be explored. Efforts should be made to expand the scope of their positions and additional offerings should be identified to expand their overall use.

The feelings expressed by the participants' correspond to earlier research by Clotfelter that dealt with alumni donor motivations. Clotfelter found that the level of interest expressed towards a student from someone at their university had a meaningful impact on their future contributions to their alma mater (2003). His research revealed that students in whom someone at the university took interest during college had twice the level of satisfaction with their alma mater and demonstrated much higher levels of giving (Clotfelter, 2003). Additional research by Pumerantz noted, "positive experiences increase the probability of giving as alumni, and negative experiences have a negative impact on giving" (Pumerantz, 2005, p. 291). Hence, if the majority of participants viewed their interactions and experiences with the academic counselors as positive and beneficial, it stands to reason the practice should be continued and perhaps expanded.

### **Market the Differences Between Online Degrees Offered by Traditional Non-Profit Universities and For-Profit Universities**

As the data revealed, most participants held very negative views of for-profit universities offering online bachelor's degrees. Again, several of the participants mentioned the University of Phoenix by name, and three of the participants admitted

having attended the University of Phoenix in the past. At the same time, the participants enumerated many of the methods their alma mater took to ensure that they received an education similar to that of traditional students and the numerous aspects of their degrees they felt were superior to those offered by online universities. Many of the participants also felt the need to defend their online bachelor's degree, as well as the hard work they put into it, throughout various portions of the interviews.

With this in mind, the case institution, as well as other colleges and universities that offer online bachelor's degrees, should include elements in their marketing campaigns that educate the public and employers about the educational rigor, similarity of the curriculum to traditional bachelor's degrees and the overall level of preparedness their online bachelor's degrees entail. In his research on alumni giving, Pumerantz noted, "having a clear institutional vision and communicating it effectively" enables colleges and universities to build a "platform upon which greater levels of alumni giving can become possible" (Pumerantz, 2005, p. 291). Additional marketing aimed at building a positive reputation for online bachelor's degrees, and illuminating the distinction between the degrees from non-profit and for-profit universities, would likely further enhance the pride and association among online alumni.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The lack of documented research concerning online bachelor's degree graduates, their experiences as students and their behavior as donors is cause for concern. As this population of alumni continues to grow at increasing rates, it is critical that colleges and universities strive to gain a better understanding of its unique perspectives and emerging

potential. As colleges and universities continue to develop new programs and deliver them in online formats, they must find ways to engage students while they are enrolled, in the hopes of increasing the likelihood they will give once they become alumni. Thus, this study provides a good baseline from which future studies can expand. Such research is important because it helps uncover new information about a largely unknown segment of alumni and sheds light on their charitable giving potential. Because of the limited resources available to raise private funds from alumni, the findings of this study could prove useful for fundraisers in their efforts to distinguish between groups of alumni with the greatest giving potential (Weerts & Ronca, 2009).

Given that research regarding online bachelor's degree graduates is limited, there exists a wide variety of topics to explore. As mentioned, mounting research has indicated that closer affiliations exist between alumni and their undergraduate alma mater than that of any other institution where a higher degree was earned (Clotfelter 2003; Gaier, 2005; McDearmon and Shirley, 2009). Armed with this information, future researchers should attempt to identify whether this phenomenon applies to online bachelor's degree alumni. Additional topics for research should include comparisons between the donor behavior of traditional alumni and their online counterparts. Large-scale studies should seek to identify if online alumni give in similar proportions to that of traditional alumni. Furthermore, researchers should seek answers to questions such as which group of alumni gives more, what differences exist between the programs to which these two groups contribute, and which group donates a larger share of their income.

Another area that is ripe with potential for future research involves the growth in for-profit, religiously affiliated universities. Grand Canyon University (GCU) provides an example of a private, religiously affiliated university that became a for-profit Christian university. GCU boasts an enrollment of over 28,000 students, more than 25,000 online and 2,600 traditional students on their Phoenix, Arizona campus (Redden, 2009). While this university maintains the designation as a traditional for-profit institution, and operates as such, it also offers unique attributes to its students that other for-profit institutions lack. For example, GCU has a “brick-and-mortar” campus that offers classroom courses. Furthermore, GCU also maintains a large collegiate athletics department that competes within the Western Athletic Conference. The university maintains a variety of men’s and women’s sports including basketball, baseball, softball, soccer, as well as many others. Future research should seek to investigate how these unique attributes and offerings impact alumni willingness to donate and their association with the institution.

In addition to examining online bachelor’s degree students and the preferences that might exist concerning their undergraduate institution, it would also benefit researchers to investigate the donor preferences of this population of alumni by institution. Valuable data could be gleaned from studies that focus on alumni who have received multiple online degrees and ascertain their willingness to donate to each institution. Additional inquiries should investigate differences that might exist concerning online graduates’ willingness to donate to one institution over another. These specific topics could uncover valuable practices being utilized at various colleges and

universities that impact engagement, association and willingness. Moreover, these topics could unearth yet unknown dynamics that exist in online undergraduate and graduate programs. Regardless of their findings, as we consider the detailed nuances of the relationships and associations between alumni and their undergraduate alma maters, social identity theory will continue to serve as an appropriate theoretical framework.

Several notable studies examining the philanthropic inclinations and donative habits of traditional alumni have been anchored in numerous applicable theoretical frameworks (Monks, 2003; Wastyn, 2009). In addition to social identity theory, other notable theories that apply to this research are social exchange theory and expectancy theory of motivations. Each of these theories provides a unique lens through which new research can be modeled and analyzed. While social identity theory relates to the intrinsic nature of an individual's self-perspective, self-concept and/or psyche, social exchange theory operates on a more superficial level and is linked to an individual's sense of self-benefit and self-preservation.

Simply put, social identity theory asks the question "who am I and why," while social exchange theory asks the question "what's in it for me, or what do I stand to gain?" Social exchange theory emerged around 1960 and is attributed to the combined efforts of George Homans, John Thibaut, Harold Kelley, and Peter Blau (Emerson, 1976). While describing the fundamental dynamics of the theory, Blau noted that individuals give when the benefits received exceed the costs of making the donation (Blau, 1964). Social exchange theory is based on the premise that relationships are



considered in economic terms and that costs and benefits are weighed to determine whether the relationship will continue (Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

Applying this theory to the relationship between alumni and their alma mater would posit that alumni will consider the costs of their support relative to the benefits they receive. Emerson described the cost/benefit analysis of social exchange as “limited to actions that are contingent on rewarding reactions from others” (Emerson, 1976). Furthermore, he added, “a resource will continue to flow only if there is a valued return contingent upon it” (Emerson, 1976). There is evidence that supports this theory as it applies to alumni giving. Monks found that positive perceptions of one’s alma mater, and their degree of satisfaction, are the greatest indicator of alumni support (Monks, 2003). Future studies utilizing social exchange theory, and focusing on online bachelor’s degree alumni, could uncover valuable new information about this growing population of alumni.

Expectancy theory was developed in 1964 by Victor Vroom, a professor at the Yale School of Management. The theory provides a framework that attempts to explain why individuals choose one option over another. Regarding alumni support, the theory suggests alumni involvement and support are based largely on the alumni’s expectations of future events. (Weerts & Ronca, 2007) This model is based on three primary motivations: (1) valence – the perceived outcome of the support; (2) instrumentality – the belief that time and/or money will help the university; and (3) expectancy – that the alumnus feels capable of a commitment. (Weerts & Ronca, 2007) Expectancy theory of motivations provides a framework useful in identifying an individual’s expectations.

Given the role that expectations play in alumni involvement, support, and philanthropic giving, expectancy theory of motivations could serve as another useful theoretical framework for future research focusing on online bachelor's degree alumni.

Future research should attempt to include larger numbers of online bachelor's degree graduates. The few studies focusing on online students were quantitative in nature. While such studies provide some information to base assumptions on, they fail to uncover important individualized perceptions central to the online experience of online bachelor's degree graduates. Additional qualitative research studies are needed to uncover new information about this often misunderstood and overlooked population of alumni. Quantitative approaches would enable researchers to obtain data from large numbers of participants and would help provide a reasonable baseline of information upon which to base additional studies. Qualitative measures would then allow researchers to delve deeper and uncover new phenomena that exist among online bachelor's degree graduates and the effect it has on the giving behavior of this group. Regardless of the research paradigm or theoretical framework employed, additional research that focuses on online bachelor's degree graduates is needed.

### **Researcher Perceptions**

Throughout the course of this study, I had several experiences that I felt were worthy of inclusion. Relying on field notes taken immediately following each interview, I was able to draw subtle comparisons and contrasts in the participant data. As I interviewed the participants, I started to realize that my effort to select them randomly was paying off. I was able to obtain a wide ranging and valuable dataset filled with a

rich, thick description of their experiences as online bachelor's degree students and alumni. This perception was validated further in the analyzing, coding and categorizing of the data.

As the analysis of the data progressed, I began to see a wide spectrum of responses. Among the twelve participants were avid supporters and fans of their alma mater, a healthy mix of those with perceptions and feelings towards the university that most would consider average, and those who had very negative feelings, or who were disappointed about the university and their experiences while enrolled and as alumni. From the fall of 2010 through the fall of 2014 the case institution graduated over 4,300 online bachelor's degree students. Given this large population, I was pleased that a random selection of twelve participants from the entire population of graduates provided such a diverse set of data.

As I began interviewing the participants, an unfortunate consequence emerged related to the consent form. The information contained in the consent form revealed the intent of the study and provided the participants with additional time to consider their responses. While I have a firm understanding of the role consent forms play in research, I felt prior knowledge of the intent of the study could serve to influence the participants' responses regarding their willingness to give to their alma mater and their actual donating behavior. If I were to conduct this research again, I would try to disguise the study topic and intent better, in the hope that I could retrieve more honest data. In my experience as a fundraiser, I have learned that most people avoid being perceived as non-charitable, even when in fact, they are. Hence, it is not uncommon for individuals to

embellish or exaggerate their charitable contributions. While I never got the impression any of the participants in this study falsified, or embellished any of their responses, given the topic, I knew that it was always a possibility.

Similar issues surfaced concerning the association that existed with the participant's alma mater. A few of the participants acknowledged that they had an association with their alma mater and even commented that they felt slightly obligated to mention this association since the study dealt with their alma mater and their willingness to donate. In retrospect, I believe several of the participants would not have thought to mention an association or connection to their alma mater, had they not been provided information prior to the interviews concerning the study topic. This occurrence reinforces the notion that a weak association exists between the majority of the participants in this study and their alma mater.

Several notable attributes of this study pertain to the qualitative nature of its design. Specifically, this study provides an excellent example of the importance of choosing an appropriate research paradigm. As the researcher, and principal research instrument for this study, I came to the conclusion that it would have had very different findings and conclusions had it been conducted utilizing quantitative research methodologies. The most notable difference would have resided in the large disparity between the participants' willingness to donate and their perceived association with their alma mater, and the lack of actual donations. The findings of this study suggest that the majority of participants were willing to donate to their alma mater. Furthermore, the majority of participants identified themselves as being associated with their alma mater.

However, while a majority of the participants revealed that they were willing to donate, only half had actually made any type of donation in the past to their alma mater and only three of the participants were current donors.

Had this study been conducted utilizing quantitative research methods, the conclusion would likely have been at odds with the well-established tenets of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, which posits that connections between an individual and a group can lead to beneficial behavior toward the group (Tyler & Bladder, 2002; Tidwell, 2005) . A well-developed quantitative research survey might have identified a disparity in the data, as well as an inconsistency with the principles of social identity theory; however, the quantitative analysis would have been unlikely to ascertain the reasons for such disparity. By using a qualitative research approach, I was able to probe further and discover more information about the disparity that exists between the online bachelor's degree alumni participants and their willingness and association, and how it relates to their donative behavior to their alma mater.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine online bachelor's degree graduates and gauge their willingness to donate money to their alma mater. The overarching goal of this research was to build upon the limited body of knowledge regarding online bachelor's degree alumni. The scant amount of research that does exist concerning this population is largely quantitative and focuses on educational outcomes, perceptions of quality and job placement statistics. As the number of online bachelor's degree programs

and their subsequent enrollment grows, it is critical that colleges and universities have a better understanding of this unique population of students and alumni.

This study was guided by three research questions: (1) to what extent are graduates of public, non-profit online bachelor's degree programs willing to donate money to their college or university, (2) how do their virtual classroom or instructional experiences as students enrolled in online bachelor's degrees impact their willingness to donate money to their college or university, and (3) how do their non-instructional experiences inside and outside the virtual classroom impact their willingness to donate money to their college or university? While the answers to these research questions are provided in detail, and embedded in the previous pages of this dissertation, I will provide abbreviated answers within the body of this conclusion.

Concerning the first research question, the majority of the participants in this study were willing to donate money to their alma mater. Furthermore, the majority of the participants in this study believed they were associated with their alma mater. Based on the principles of Social Identity Theory, the participants' association is an important distinction as a willingness to donate is an extension of an individual's association with their alma mater. Regarding the second research question, the majority of the participants in this study noted that their virtual classroom, or instructional experiences, positively impacted their willingness to donate to their alma mater. Further analysis of the participant data also revealed that their virtual classroom, or instructional experiences, also positively impacted their association with their alma mater as well. In reference to the third research question, the majority of the participants in this study felt

their non-instructional experiences inside and outside the virtual classroom positively impacted their willingness to donate money to their alma mater. Additional analysis of the participant data also revealed that their non-instructional experiences positively impacted their association with their alma mater as well.

The answers to these research questions were revealed through the participant responses to numerous interview questions and through analyzing the participant data through the lens of Social Identity Theory. A major secondary finding of this study relates to the disparity that exists between the participants noted willingness to donate money and noted association and identification with their alma mater, and their lack of donations made to their alma mater. Again, using Social Identity Theory as a theoretical framework, it appears that while an association exists between the participants and their alma mater, the association lacks the strength necessary to move their stated willingness to donate into an actual donation.

There is no denying the fact that public colleges and universities are going to require significantly higher levels of private support to operate effectively (Pumerantz, 2005). Declines in state funding for higher education have become commonplace across the United States and demand that more attention be paid to online bachelor's degree alumni as a source of alternative financial support. Creating unique student experiences, developing a fundraising approach tailored to online bachelor's degree students, and marketing the clear differences between non-profit and for-profit online bachelor's degrees are strategies that suggest great potential. As new technologies emerge, practitioners are often slow to respond to the challenges and opportunities they present.

All too often it is only at the precipice that we realize opportunities and find the will to change existing behavior. At this critical juncture, it is paramount that colleges and universities develop strategies to engage the growing number of online bachelor's degree alumni and obtain a greater share of their donative potential.

Based on the results of this study, significant reformation of the structure, delivery and operation of online bachelor's degree programs must take place. If the current system of online bachelor's degrees does not undergo a restructuring of method and delivery, the ranks of online bachelor's degree graduates with limited or no connection to their alma maters will continue to grow. Moving forward, colleges and universities must create an environment in the online community that fosters the development of unique experiences that impact students' association with their alma mater. This course of action is essential if online bachelor's degree alumni are to make meaningful and measureable donations to their alma mater. If colleges and universities aim to maximize opportunities for raising funds from this unique population of alumni, they must develop tactics and approaches to build the necessary relationships with them.

Change is constant. The only thing in question is one's ability to recognize it, evolve alongside it, and take advantage of the ever present opportunities it reveals. With the expansion of online bachelor's degree programs, the landscape of higher education has changed and likely will continue to do so. The population of online alumni is growing, and their student experiences appear to differ as much as their philanthropic intent and behavior. Ever since the formation of the first alumni associations, colleges and universities have longed to gain a better understanding of the unique dynamic that is



their alumni and identify ways from which their institutions can benefit. Now, perhaps more than ever, institutions of higher learning must foster a more inclusive environment for online alumni so that they can tap into the vast potential of this emerging group.

As online education has evolved in the United States, it has been an interesting phenomenon to watch and experience. Technology has opened the door for scores of students to pursue their dreams of a higher education. What's more, the meteoric rise in the popularity of online degrees has surprised many in the academic community. The title of this dissertation poses the question "Does distance make the heart grow fonder?" Concerning the online bachelor's degree graduates that participated in this study, it appears that it does not. There appeared to be no evidence of a willingness to donate or an association with the participants' alma mater in excess of the principles that social identity theory posits. However, with new ideas, different approaches and a targeted strategy, the online bachelor's degree graduate might continue to surprise us all.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **First Round:**

- 1) List for me the organizations you identify/association yourself with.
- 2) What factors led to your decision to choose the university you attended?
- 3) Why did you decide to embark on an online bachelor's degree program?
- 4) How much of your bachelor's degree did you complete online?
- 5) Describe your overall experience while enrolled as a student in your online bachelor's degree program.
- 6) Can you recall if the university created, or coordinated any activities, events or initiatives that were geared towards online students?
- 7) In what ways did the university contact you while enrolled in your online degree program?
- 8) When thinking about your time as a student in the online bachelor's degree program, how does your experience in the classroom impact your willingness to donate money back to the university?
- 9) How does your experience outside the classroom impact your willingness to donate money back to the university?
- 10) Describe your overall willingness to donate money to the university where you earned your online bachelor's degree
- 11) In what ways has the university made contact with you since graduating?
- 12) In what ways has the university asked you to donate money to any of its programs or initiatives?
- 13) Are you a current donor?
- 14) Do you plan to become a donor?
- 15) Is there anything pertinent to this study that you would like to add that perhaps these questions have not addressed?

#### **Second Round:**

- 1) Regardless of whether you are an actual member of the university's alumni association, do you feel as though you are a part of the alumni? Please provide a few details as to why you do, or do not feel, a part of the alumni.
- 2) Do you give money to the other organizations you identified with?
- 3) What would need to happen in order for you to become more closely associated with the university?